Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities
Publisher: Kabul University

Available at https://jssh.edu.af

Contested Connectivity: Afghanistan in Eurasian Geoeconomic Networks and Development Scenarios

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Received: August 24, 2026
Revised: Sep 24, 2026
Accepted: Oct 12, 2026
Published: Oct 30, 2026

Keywords

- Afghanistan geoeconomics
- Contested connectivity
- Development scenarios
- Eurasian networks
- Regional integration

Abstract: This article examines Afghanistan's geoeconomic position within contested Eurasian connectivity networks and explores its potential development trajectories under changing regional and domestic conditions. Situated at the intersection of major regional economic spaces, Afghanistan occupies a potentially significant position in emerging patterns of Eurasian connectivity; however, multiple, often competing political, strategic, infrastructural, and institutional factors shape the realization of this potential. Using a qualitative research design, the study applies thematic analysis to 35 purposively selected academic sources identified through Google Scholar, based on publication period, relevance to the research topic, and alignment with the study's key concepts and keywords. The analysis identifies five interrelated dynamics shaping Afghanistan's geoeconomic role: Eurasian network reconfiguration, interregional connectivity, infrastructure corridors, strategic competition, and internal barriers. These dynamics do not operate independently; they interact in ways that shape both the opportunities and constraints of Afghanistan's integration into broader regional economic processes. The study conceptualizes their convergence through the central theme of contested connectivity, highlighting the uncertain, uneven, and conditional nature of Afghanistan's position within Eurasian networks. Based on this analysis, the study further develops four possible development scenarios: marginalization, strategic insulation, asymmetric dependent connectivity, and integration hub development. The findings suggest that Afghanistan's future position will depend on the interaction of regional competition, infrastructure development, institutional capacity, and domestic stability, which together will influence the direction and extent of its integration into Eurasian connectivity networks.

To Cite this Article: Zargham, Z. (2026). Contested Connectivity: Afghanistan in Eurasian Geoeconomic Networks and Development Scenarios. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, *3*(4). 962-987 https://doi.org/10.62810/jssh.v3i4.431

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INTRODUCTION

The expansion of regional connectivity initiatives across Eurasia has intensified scholarly and policy attention to the changing relationship between infrastructure, trade networks, and

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Available online at https://jssh.edu.af/jssh/article/view/431

regional economic interaction. Over the past two decades, initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), regional energy transmission projects, and emerging multimodal transit routes have contributed to the reconfiguration of economic linkages across Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and western China. Connectivity has consequently become more than a technical matter of transportation and trade facilitation. It has increasingly been embedded in broader processes of economic interdependence, regional influence, and strategic competition. From a geoeconomic perspective, infrastructure, investment, trade, and connectivity can serve as instruments through which states pursue strategic interests and shape regional environments (Luttwak, 1990; Blackwill & Harris, 2016).

Within this evolving Eurasian landscape, Afghanistan occupies a geographically significant yet structurally fragile position. At the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and western China, the country has often been portrayed as a potential bridge linking historically fragmented regional spaces. Early studies emphasized Afghanistan's geographic centrality and its potential role as a transit corridor within Eurasia (Saikal, 2014). This perspective was later developed through historical and economic analyses that highlight Afghanistan's earlier connections to regional trade networks and the possibility of its reintegration into contemporary connectivity systems (Marsden, 2021). Similarly, Noorzi (2021) argues that Afghanistan's geographic location creates opportunities for regional transportation and trade routes to converge. More recent research has likewise continued to conceptualize the country as an intermediary space capable of reducing infrastructural and economic fragmentation, particularly between Central and South Asia (Javaid, 2024; Chaghaty & Bagramwal, 2025).

This geographic interpretation, however, represents only one dimension of Afghanistan's position within regional economic networks. Translating geographic centrality into geoeconomic influence or developmental benefit depends on a broader set of political, institutional, and structural conditions. Persistent political instability, weak institutional capacity, economic dependency, infrastructural limitations, and security volatility have historically constrained Afghanistan's capacity to transform its strategic location into sustained regional integration and economic advantage (Mohapatra, 2020; Sail & Miakhil, 2026). Rather than automatically functioning as a bridge between neighboring regions, Afghanistan's geographic position has therefore remained mediated by domestic state capacity, political conditions, and the nature of its relationships with external actors.

This tension between geographic potential and structural constraint has generated two broad tendencies within the existing literature. On the one hand, a substantial body of research emphasizes the opportunities associated with Afghanistan's participation in regional connectivity projects. For example, studies of the BRI suggest that Chinese-led infrastructure investment and expanded transportation links could facilitate Afghanistan's integration into broader Eurasian economic networks by improving connectivity and trade opportunities (Tian et al., 2024). Research on specific transportation routes has similarly examined the potential significance of the Wakhan Corridor in connecting Afghanistan with China (Yawar, 2024) and Afghanistan's possible complementary role within the broader framework of the

International North–South Transport Corridor (Mubariz & Keliwaal, 2024). Such studies generally suggest that regional infrastructure development may reduce Afghanistan's economic isolation and strengthen its role in interregional exchange.

On the other hand, a more critical strand of scholarship questions whether participation in regional connectivity networks necessarily produces autonomous or inclusive development. Researchers emphasize that corridor-based integration can create asymmetric relationships, particularly where weak institutions, political uncertainty, and limited productive capacity restrict a country's ability to shape the terms of its economic integration (Jabarkhil & Parikh, 2023; Mahmood, 2025). From this perspective, infrastructure and connectivity should not be understood as politically neutral mechanisms. As Forough (2019) argues in the context of Eurasian geoeconomic restructuring, major infrastructure projects may also function as instruments of strategic influence and regional power competition. Consequently, integrating peripheral or institutionally fragile states into wider networks may simultaneously create connectivity opportunities and expose them to new forms of dependency and vulnerability.

Understanding these dynamics requires an analytical perspective that moves beyond a purely geographic or infrastructure-centered interpretation of connectivity. Geoeconomics offers an important foundation for this analysis by highlighting the strategic use of economic instruments to pursue political and geopolitical objectives. Luttwak (1990) famously argued that interstate competition in the post-Cold War environment increasingly operates through the "grammar of commerce," while Blackwill and Harris (2016) conceptualize geoeconomics as the strategic use of economic instruments, including trade, investment, and infrastructure, to advance geopolitical interests. Through this lens, regional corridors and connectivity initiatives are not simply economic projects; they may also serve as mechanisms through which states seek market access, political influence, strategic leverage, and greater control over regional flows.

A relational understanding of networks further helps explain why the consequences of connectivity are unevenly distributed among states. Network approaches emphasize that influence and vulnerability are shaped not only by participation in a network but also by an actor's structural position within it. Freeman (1978) demonstrates that actors occupying strategically intermediary or highly connected positions may derive influence from their location within relational structures. This perspective is particularly relevant to Afghanistan, whose geographic position may create potential intermediary advantages without necessarily guaranteeing actual influence. The extent to which geographic location can be converted into economic or political leverage depends on whether the country possesses the institutional, infrastructural, and political capacity to participate effectively in regional networks.

The concept of weaponized interdependence further highlights the strategic vulnerabilities that may emerge from asymmetric network structures. Farrell and Newman (2019) argue that states occupying central positions within global networks may, under certain conditions, transform economic interdependence into instruments of surveillance,

coercion, or strategic pressure. Although Afghanistan does not occupy such a central position, the concept is analytically relevant for examining how peripheral actors may experience dependency within networks organized around more powerful states and strategically significant nodes. Connectivity, therefore, can expand access while increasing exposure to external influence when participation occurs under conditions of substantial asymmetry.

Domestic institutions and local agency play an equally important role in mediating these processes. Scholarship on Eurasian regional competition cautions against reducing regional dynamics to a simplified contest among major powers. Cooley (2012), for example, demonstrates that regional outcomes are also shaped by domestic institutions, local bargaining processes, and variations in state capacity. This insight is particularly significant in the Afghan context, where the consequences of regional competition and connectivity are likely to depend not only on the strategies of China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and other regional actors but also on Afghanistan's own institutional capacity and ability to negotiate, regulate, and strategically engage with competing external initiatives. Safranchuk (2019) similarly emphasizes how domestic political conditions shape Afghanistan's future regional role, while Yar et al. (2023) underline the country's continuing geopolitical and geoeconomic significance within evolving regional connectivity systems.

A limited structural perspective also helps illuminate the possibility of uneven integration. As Wallerstein (1974) suggests, peripheral regions may occupy strategically important positions within wider economic systems while remaining weakly integrated into processes of value generation, industrial production, and economic decision-making. Applied cautiously to Afghanistan, this perspective raises an important question: can the country's geographic centrality drive meaningful developmental transformation, or might it instead produce transit-based integration in which value, strategic influence, and decision-making remain concentrated elsewhere?

Despite substantial research on Afghanistan's strategic geography, regional connectivity, and infrastructure potential, the literature remains fragmented across these dimensions. Limited attention has been paid to how geoeconomic competition, network positioning, and domestic structural conditions jointly shape Afghanistan's role in Eurasian connectivity and generate divergent development trajectories. The article addresses the following research questions:

- How is Afghanistan positioned within contested Eurasian geoeconomic networks and regional connectivity dynamics?
- What development scenarios may emerge from the interaction between regional geoeconomic competition and Afghanistan's internal structural conditions?

To address the identified research gap and answer the research questions, this study pursues the following objectives:

- To analyze Afghanistan's positioning within contested Eurasian geoeconomic networks and regional connectivity dynamics, with particular attention to how regional competition and connectivity structures interact.
- To examine how the interaction between regional geoeconomic competition and Afghanistan's domestic structural conditions shapes alternative geoeconomic development pathways and their potential implications for the economic transformation.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine Afghanistan's geoeconomic positioning within Eurasian economic networks and to identify alternative geoeconomic development pathways. The study follows an interpretive and analytical orientation, focusing on concepts, thematic patterns, relational dynamics, and structural processes reflected in the existing literature. Rather than treating Afghanistan's geographic centrality or infrastructure potential as sufficient conditions for economic transformation, the analysis examines how regional geoeconomic competition, network positioning, connectivity structures, and domestic structural conditions interact to shape alternative development trajectories. The research relies exclusively on secondary textual sources.

Sampling

The study used purposive sampling to select literature aligned with its research objectives and questions. The sampling frame consisted of academic and institutional publications addressing Afghanistan's geoeconomic, geopolitical, economic, and regional connectivity position. Sources published between 2015 and 2026 were considered for inclusion.

Sources were included if they addressed Afghanistan's position within Eurasian economic networks, regional integration, infrastructure development, trade corridors, connectivity initiatives, and provided substantive analytical or empirical discussion relevant to the research questions. Sources were excluded if they lacked direct relevance to the research focus, provided insufficient substantive discussion, or duplicated other selected materials. After screening and assessing relevance, 35 sources were retained as the final units of analysis. Selection continued until additional sources yielded no substantially new concepts or thematic dimensions relevant to the analytical framework.

Data collection

Data collection involved a systematic search of secondary literature using Google Scholar as the primary search platform. The search covered publications from 2015 to 2026 and employed combinations of keywords directly related to the research objectives. These included Afghanistan geoeconomics, Afghanistan geopolitics, Eurasian economic networks, Belt and Road Initiative, Afghanistan economic corridors, and Afghanistan connectivity. Keywords were searched individually and in relevant combinations to identify publications

addressing Afghanistan's geoeconomic positioning, regional connectivity, infrastructure corridors, economic networks, and geopolitical and strategic dynamics.

The identified publications were screened against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Relevant materials were then examined for substantive content related to the research questions. The selected texts formed the documentary dataset for subsequent coding, thematic categorization, and analysis.

Instrumentation

The study used a structured literature search and document review procedure to identify, screen, and organize relevant secondary sources. Google Scholar served as the primary literature search platform, while the specified keywords and inclusion and exclusion criteria guided source identification and selection. A structured coding and categorization procedure was used to extract relevant textual passages and organize them according to recurring concepts, relationships, conditions, and processes.

The coding procedure provided a consistent basis for comparing findings across sources and tracing how analytical categories developed from initial concepts to subthemes and main themes.

Data Analysis

The selected sources were analyzed using thematic analysis following the general principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis proceeded inductively, allowing analytical categories to emerge from the textual materials rather than imposing a predetermined set of themes. The process involved five interconnected stages.

First, the selected sources were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the material and identify passages relevant to the research questions. Second, meaningful textual segments were coded to capture recurring concepts, relationships, structural conditions, and processes. Third, conceptually related codes were compared, grouped, and refined into subthemes. Fourth, related subthemes were integrated into broader main themes representing the principal dimensions of Afghanistan's geoeconomic positioning. Finally, the study examined relationships among the main themes through further conceptual abstraction to identify a core theme that captures the central analytical logic emerging from the dataset. Building on the thematic findings, the study developed alternative geoeconomic development scenarios through an interpretive and analytical process.

FINDINGS

The study identified five interrelated dimensions shaping Afghanistan's geoeconomic positioning within Eurasian economic networks. These themes collectively reflect the growing importance of Eurasian geoeconomic network reconfiguration, interregional connectivity, infrastructure corridors, strategic contestation, and internal barriers in shaping Afghanistan's regional role. The findings indicate that external connectivity dynamics and internal political, institutional, economic, and social conditions shape the country's geoeconomic significance.

Table 1. *Eurasian geoeconomic network reconfiguration*

Sources	Concepts	Subthemes
Rolland (2017)	Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure expansion	Sinocentric connectivity
Forough (2019)	Restructuring of Eurasian trade geography	
Zreik (2025)	China-centered connectivity architecture	
Summers (2016)	Cross-border economic interdependence	Transnational integration
Shoaib (2022)	Global regional network integration	
	Networked political economy structures	
Rakhimov (2018)	Overlapping regional governance structures.	Multiscale regionalism
Summers (2016)	Interaction of local, regional, and global scales.	
	Nested regional integration processes	

Source: Author's thematic synthesis of the cited literature

Eurasian Geoeconomic Network Reconfiguration

The findings associated with this theme indicate that Afghanistan's emerging geoeconomic position cannot be understood solely through conventional geopolitical interpretations centered on territorial rivalry or geographic determinism.

Sinocentric Connectivity

The findings on Sinocentric Connectivity show that contemporary Eurasian integration is increasingly structured around China-centered infrastructural and economic initiatives, particularly through the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The coded data indicate that regional connectivity is no longer understood merely as neutral economic cooperation, but as a strategic reorganization of trade routes, transportation systems, and infrastructural dependencies centered on Chinese economic expansion.

The concepts indicate that China is increasingly positioned as a central organizing actor within emerging Eurasian economic networks. The findings imply that connectivity infrastructures operate not only as mechanisms of economic exchange, but also as instruments through which influence, market access, and regional leverage are extended across transnational space. These findings align closely with the geoeconomic perspective developed by Luttwak (1990) and Blackwill and Harris (2016), who conceptualize economic instruments and infrastructure systems as strategic tools of state power.

Transnational Integration

Regional economic processes in Eurasia increasingly operate through interconnected, interdependent cross-border networks that transcend conventional territorial boundaries. Regional integration is being shaped through expanding patterns of economic interdependence, transregional infrastructural linkages, and networked political economic arrangements that connect local economies to broader regional and global systems.

The codes cross-border economic interdependence, global regional network integration, and networked political economy structures reflect the growing importance of relational forms of integration, in which economic influence and participation depend on access to transnational networks.

These findings align closely with relational network theory, particularly Freeman (1978), which emphasizes the importance of structural positioning within networks. The findings support the argument that states derive strategic significance not only from material capabilities or territorial size, but also from their degree of embeddedness within broader systems of connectivity and exchange. The findings also partially align with Farrell and Newman's (2019) concept of weaponized interdependence.

Multiscale Regionalism

It shows that Eurasian regional integration operates through overlapping, interconnected layers of governance, authority, and economic coordination that span local, national, regional, and global scales. State-centric models alone cannot adequately explain regional processes, since multiple actors, institutional arrangements, and governance structures simultaneously shape regional connectivity outcomes.

These findings strongly correspond with Cooley's (2012) critique of New Great Game approaches. Like Cooley's argument, the findings show that regional outcomes are mediated not only by external geopolitical competition, but also by domestic institutional conditions, local bargaining processes, and uneven governance capacities.

***Table 2**. Main them 2: interregional connectivity*

Sources	Concepts	Subthemes
Sadat (2015) Javaid (2024) Cacicedo (2022) Weinbaum (2021) Zreik (2025) Cacicedo (2022) Roy (2017)	Geographic location between Central, South, and West Asia landlocked but transit relevant position Intermediary role in Eurasian transport flows Afghanistan as a bridge state Corridor bridging potential across Eurasia	Strategic intermediary
World Bank (2025) ADB (2026)	Integration into North-South and East-West trade corridors Node function in transcontinental networks Transit hub potential	Corridor integration

Source: Author's thematic synthesis of the cited literature

Interregional Connectivity

Across the data, recurring patterns consistently emphasized Afghanistan's potential role in connecting fragmented regional economic spaces. However, the findings simultaneously indicate that such strategic significance should not be interpreted through geographically deterministic assumptions.

Strategic Intermediary

This subtheme identified Afghanistan's geographic location at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia as a major source of strategic relevance. The geographic location between Central, South, and West Asia; the landlocked but transit-relevant position; and the intermediary role in Eurasian transport flows demonstrate the recurring emphasis on Afghanistan's territorial position. These findings indicate that Afghanistan is increasingly positioned as a potential intermediary between energy-producing Central Asian states, major

South Asian consumer markets, and westward trade routes extending toward the Middle East and Europe.

This finding aligns with broader geoeconomic arguments that strategic influence increasingly derives from the ability to facilitate and manage economic flows rather than traditional territorial control (Luttwak, 1990; Blackwill & Harris, 2016). If operationalized effectively, Afghanistan's bridge-state role could strengthen its bargaining position in regional economic diplomacy.

Corridor Integration

The third subtheme emerged through repeated references to Afghanistan's incorporation into regional transport corridors. These findings show that Afghanistan is gradually being incorporated into emerging regional connectivity architectures that seek to reduce logistical fragmentation across Eurasia. Such integration may increase transit revenues, trade access, and regional economic relevance.

However, the findings also reveal substantial structural risks. Interpreted through Farrell and Newman's (2019) concept of weaponized interdependence, corridor integration may simultaneously create new forms of vulnerability. Dependence on externally financed infrastructure projects may increase Afghanistan's exposure to asymmetric bargaining relationships and external political pressure.

Table 3. *Main theme 3: Infrastructure corridors*

Sources	Concepts	Subthemes
Sadat (2015) World Bank (CASA-1000) Javaid (2024) Ludin et al. (2024) Tariq (2023) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018) World Bank (2012) Kakar, A. (2023)	CASA-1000 electricity transmission TAPI gas pipeline corridor TAP electricity transmission Lapis Lazuli corridor, Khaf-Herat Hairatan railway corridor Aqina railway corridor Torghundi railway corridor	Energy and transport corridors
Dhaka, A. (2026) Shahi, D. K. (2022) Omidi & Noolkar (2022) Javaid (2024) Rahman et la. (2022) Price and Hakimi (2019).	Trans-Afghan railway Wakhan corridor Chabahar port Gwadar port Air corridor to India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the EU, Kazakhstan, and the United Arab Emirates	Alternative Corridors

Source: Author's thematic synthesis of the cited literature

Infrastructure Corridors

Infrastructure corridors frame Afghanistan as a potential transit space linking Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and broader Eurasian markets. However, the coding results also reveal an important analytical contradiction. Although the literature frequently portrays Afghanistan as a strategically significant connector within regional infrastructure networks, most identified corridor projects remain incomplete, externally financed, politically contingent, or weakly institutionalized.

Energy and transport corridors

These projects position Afghanistan primarily as a transit territory connecting energy-producing regions in Central Asia with energy-consuming markets in South Asia. From a geoeconomic perspective, the analyzed sources frame these corridors as mechanisms for promoting regional interdependence and facilitating cross-border energy circulation. Afghanistan's role within these projects remains largely infrastructural rather than strategic.

This distinction is analytically significant because several sources implicitly assume that transit geography can generate regional leverage and economic influence. Yet the coded data suggests that infrastructural participation alone does not necessarily produce strategic centrality. Most energy projects remain dependent on political stability, security guarantees, external financing, and sustained multilateral coordination, all of which remain uncertain in the Afghan context. Viewed through Freeman's (1978) relational network theory, Afghanistan occupies an intermediary geographic location without achieving corresponding network centrality. Transport corridors include transport-oriented infrastructure projects such as the Lapis Lazuli corridor and the Khaf-Herat, Hairatan, Aqina, and Torghundi railway corridors. Together, these codes reflect a sustained emphasis in the literature on regional transport integration and continental logistics connectivity.

The findings show that fluctuating geopolitical alignments and limited domestic institutional capacity shape Afghanistan's transport connectivity. In this respect, the results align with Cooley's (2012) argument that Eurasian connectivity projects are mediated through bargaining processes, institutional constraints, and regional political competition rather than functioning as purely technical infrastructure arrangements.

Alternative Corridors

The second subtheme captures emerging and alternative connectivity initiatives, including the Trans-Afghan Railway, the Wakhan Corridor, and maritime access through Chabahar and Gwadar. These initiatives are largely presented as future-oriented possibilities linked to Eurasian integration and alternative trade routes rather than fully operational corridors. Difficult geography, limited infrastructure, and complex regional coordination continue to constrain the Wakhan Corridor and Trans-Afghan Railway. Similarly, access to Chabahar and Gwadar can reduce Afghanistan's economic isolation and expand trade opportunities, while simultaneously creating external dependencies and potential vulnerabilities. In line with Farrell and Newman's (2019) concept of weaponized interdependence, externally controlled maritime infrastructure may serve as a chokepoint for political and economic pressure.

Air corridors involving countries such as India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, the UAE, and EU members offer an alternative connectivity mechanism, particularly for facilitating trade and bypassing disruptions in land transit.

***Table 4**. Strategic contestation*

Sources	Concepts	Subthemes
Kim & Indeo (2013) Rolland (2017) Shoaib (2022) Weinbaum (2021) Omidi & Noolkar (2022) Javaid (2024) Sadat (2015)	US and China strategic competition in Eurasia Belt and Road Initiative expansion New Silk Road strategy of the United States Sino-Russian coordination and rivalry dynamics Chabahar vs Pakistani port routes Overlapping corridor initiatives in South and Central Asia competition between alternative Eurasian trade corridors	Eurasian rivalry
Forough (2019) Samad (2024) Ali (2022) Clarke (2016)	Infrastructure as an instrument of geopolitical influence Investment-led strategic competition Economic corridors as power projection tools Securitization of connectivity projects	Infrastructure statecraft

Source: Author's thematic synthesis of the cited literature

Strategic Contestation

The study shows that discussions of Eurasian connectivity around Afghanistan are often framed in terms of strategic competition, regional influence, and competing connectivity visions.

Eurasian rivalry

The Eurasian rivalry subtheme captures strategic competition surrounding major connectivity initiatives, including China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the United States' New Silk Road strategy, Sino-Russian dynamics, and competing corridors such as Chabahar, Gwadar, and Pakistani transit routes. The literature often frames Eurasia as a space of competing economic, infrastructural, and strategic interests, where efforts to diversify or control transit access create asymmetric influence (Freeman, 1978). However, Afghanistan's actual integration into these broader frameworks remains limited and uneven. Rather than being at the center of a clearly defined geopolitical confrontation, Afghanistan appears within overlapping strategic and commercial narratives, supporting Cooley's (2012) critique of simplified New Great Game interpretations.

Infrastructure Statecraft

The second subtheme reflects the politicization of infrastructure within regional connectivity discussions. Across the coded materials, infrastructure investment is frequently represented not only as an economic activity but also as a mechanism through which states pursue influence, strengthen regional presence, or shape patterns of economic dependence.

The coding results show that different regional actors pursue distinct objectives through infrastructure engagement. China's connectivity initiatives are commonly associated with long-term economic integration strategies, India's support for Chabahar is frequently discussed in relation to alternative regional access routes, Pakistan's corridor policies emphasize transit relevance, and Russia's regional engagement reflects broader concerns about influence in Central Asia.

Theoretically, these patterns broadly align with geoeconomic approaches that view infrastructure, trade networks, and connectivity projects as instruments through which states pursue strategic influence and regional positioning (Luttwak, 1990; Blackwill & Harris, 2016).

***Table 5**: Internal barriers*

Sources	Concepts	Subthemes
UNDP (2025) World Bank (2026) ADB (2026) Mahmoudinia (2024)	Governance weakness Policy uncertainty Investment insecurity	Institutional fragility
UNDP (2025)	Aid dependence Weak private sector Low domestic productivity	Economic dependency
Waissi (2025)	labor exclusion	Socio-Environmental Vulnerabilities
Saba et al. (2026)	Migration pressures	
Roy (2017)	Household vulnerability	
UNDP (2025)	Drought	
ADB (2026)	Climate vulnerability	
Javaid (2024)	Agricultural instability	

Source: Author's thematic synthesis of the cited literature

Internal Barriers

This theme captures the internal structural conditions that constrain Afghanistan's ability to benefit from emerging regional connectivity initiatives in Eurasia. Although Afghanistan is often described as a strategically located state between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, the findings show that internal structural weaknesses continue to limit the country's ability to translate its geographic position into meaningful economic advantage.

Institutional fragility

The findings indicate that institutional uncertainty, weak governance, and security-related investment constraints remain major internal barriers to economic integration. These factors create an unstable domestic environment that discourages long-term investment and complicates implementing large-scale infrastructure and trade projects.

The findings further suggest that domestic institutional weakness affects how Afghanistan engages with external economic actors involved in regional connectivity projects. Limited governance capacity may reduce the country's ability to manage complex economic agreements and infrastructure arrangements effectively. This interpretation aligns with Alexander Cooley's (2012) argument that regional economic projects are shaped not only by external power competition but also by domestic institutional capacity and local political conditions.

Economic dependency

The findings reveal that aid-dependent macroeconomic structures, weak private-sector development, declining per capita income, and a fragile economic recovery continue to limit Afghanistan's economic resilience. These conditions reflect a domestic economy that remains highly vulnerable to external shocks and lacks sufficient internal productive strength. The findings show that even if regional trade corridors expand, Afghanistan may struggle to maximize economic gains if domestic production capacity remains weak. Economic

participation in regional networks requires not only geographic access but also internal economic stability. This pattern reflects Wallerstein's (1974) perspective on peripheral integration, which explains how geographically significant states may remain economically marginalized within broader regional systems.

Socio-Environmental Vulnerabilities

The Socio-Environmental Vulnerabilities subtheme highlights household subsistence insecurity, gender-based labor-market exclusion, return migration pressures, drought, climate vulnerability, and agricultural instability as interconnected constraints on Afghanistan's economic stability. These vulnerabilities weaken livelihoods, restrict workforce participation, increase pressure on employment and public services, and disrupt agricultural production, particularly in rural areas. Together, they function primarily as internal structural constraints that reduce domestic resilience and limit Afghanistan's sustained participation in regional economic networks.

Core Theme: Contested Connectivity

Findings indicate that Afghanistan's position within Eurasian economic networks is shaped by contested connectivity, a core theme in which geographic centrality simultaneously creates opportunities for regional integration and exposes the country to structural vulnerability and strategic competition. Located at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and the broader Eurasian space, Afghanistan occupies a potential intermediary position within evolving trade, transport, energy, maritime, and air connectivity systems. Expanding infrastructure corridors reflect broader efforts by regional and external actors to incorporate Afghanistan into transregional connectivity networks, reinforcing its role as a potential transit space within Eurasian geoeconomic flows.

This core theme emerges from five interrelated dimensions. Eurasian geoeconomic network reconfiguration captures structural transformations in regional economic relations, interregional connectivity reflects Afghanistan's intermediary position within these networks, infrastructure corridors constitute the material basis of connectivity, strategic contestation highlights competing efforts by regional and external actors to shape connectivity routes and influence, and internal barriers refer to domestic institutional, economic, social, and environmental constraints that limit Afghanistan's capacity to convert connectivity into sustained development. These dimensions demonstrate that Afghanistan's position within Eurasian networks is continuously produced through the interaction of connectivity opportunities, geopolitical competition, and internal structural constraints.

Development Scenarios for Afghanistan

The geoeconomic development scenarios identified in this study emerged through an analytical process that moved iteratively between empirical findings and theoretical interpretation. These scenarios drew on qualitative evidence about Afghanistan's evolving position within Eurasian economic networks and were refined through engagement with theories of geoeconomics, networks, weaponized interdependence, and dependency. This process enabled the study to move from findings toward a typological framework explaining

divergent geoeconomic trajectories. The empirical findings revealed that two major causal mechanisms shape Afghanistan's geoeconomic future.

The first mechanism is internal opportunities. Findings on economic fragility, institutional weakness, social vulnerability, and environmental stress consistently show that internal conditions shape whether connectivity translates into sustainable development outcomes. This finding challenges deterministic assumptions that infrastructure integration automatically produces economic development. Instead, domestic institutional capacity mediates how external opportunities are converted into national gains.

This argument partially aligns with dependency theory, which explains how peripheral states may remain structurally subordinate despite integration into broader economic systems (Wallerstein, 1993). However, this study extends dependency theory by demonstrating that peripheral vulnerability is shaped by both external structural hierarchies and internal governance limitations.

Findings on interregional connectivity, including Afghanistan’s role as a strategic intermediary, bridge state, and participant in corridor integration, show its potential to serve as a connective node linking Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and China. From a network perspective, this reflects the importance of nodal positioning and centrality within regional systems. Network theory suggests that actors occupying central positions may gain brokerage advantages and enhanced strategic relevance (Freeman, 1978). However, the findings also demonstrate that geographic centrality alone does not automatically produce developmental gains.

The second mechanism concerns external contestation and the political economy of regional integration. Findings on infrastructure corridors, dependency risks, and corridor competition indicate that connectivity projects often operate within broader dynamics of strategic rivalry. Geoeconomic theory argues that states increasingly employ trade, infrastructure, and investment as instruments of strategic competition rather than purely economic cooperation (Luttwak, 1990; Blackwill & Harris, 2016). Similarly, Cooley (2012) shows how smaller states often navigate major-power competition through bargaining and selective alignment.

The findings also strongly reflect the logic of asymmetric interdependence. While regional integration may generate economic opportunities, it can also create vulnerability when weaker states become dependent on dominant actors controlling critical networks. This dynamic aligns with the concept of weaponized interdependence advanced by Farrell and Newman (2019)

Building on these two mechanisms, the analysis conceptualizes domestic capacity and network integration as the principal dimensions shaping Afghanistan’s geoeconomic trajectories. The findings indicate that geographic centrality alone is insufficient to produce sustainable developmental outcomes; the effects of regional integration depend on how internal institutional capacity interacts with the structure of external connectivity relations. Based on these dimensions, four geoeconomic scenarios are identified. These scenarios represent analytically constructed trajectories showing how different combinations of

domestic capacity and regional integration can generate divergent outcomes, ranging from relative strategic autonomy to economic integration.

Table 6: *Scenarios Matrix*

Dimensions	Low network integration	High network integration
High domestic capacity	Strategic Insulation	Integration Hub
Low domestic capacity	Marginalization	Asymmetric Dependent Connectivity

Source: Author's thematic synthesis

Marginalization

This scenario reflects a trajectory in which Afghanistan becomes progressively excluded from emerging Eurasian connectivity networks as both external and internal dynamics converge against its participation. Despite its location at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, and Middle East corridors, geography alone does not generate strategic relevance.

At the regional level, competing corridor initiatives gradually bypass Afghanistan. The expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative through Pakistan via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the growing strategic importance of Chabahar port, the operationalization of the international north-south transport corridor, and expanding trans-Caspian routes through Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye reduce the geopolitical necessity of Afghan territory. In a corridor-competition environment, regional actors increasingly prioritize reliability over geographic proximity.

Domestically, this exclusion is reinforced by persistent institutional fragility. Weak regulatory institutions, fragmented governance structures, insecurity, inadequate infrastructure maintenance, limited fiscal capacity, and an underdeveloped productive base prevent Afghanistan from positioning itself as a credible transit hub. Even when external actors propose infrastructure investment, political uncertainty, poor administrative coordination, and concerns about long-term viability constrain implementation.

The economic consequences of this scenario are severe. Afghanistan remains dependent on foreign aid, informal trade, remittance flows, and low-value extractive activities while failing to capture meaningful benefits from regional trade expansion. Employment generation remains weak, industrial diversification stagnates, and transit revenues fail to materialize. Over time, a self-reinforcing cycle emerges: exclusion from regional networks reduces investment and growth opportunities, while continued economic weakness further deepens political fragility. Under this scenario, Afghanistan is not merely disconnected; it becomes structurally peripheral to Eurasia's evolving geoeconomic architecture.

Strategic Insulation

This scenario reflects a pathway in which Afghanistan deliberately limits its integration into Eurasian connectivity networks despite possessing relatively stronger domestic institutional capacity. Unlike the marginalization scenario ,where external forces impose exclusion and internal fragility reinforces it, here limited connectivity emerges as a strategic policy choice shaped by concerns over sovereignty, dependency, and geopolitical entrapment. Afghanistan remains connected to regional economies, but in a highly selective, carefully managed way.

This trajectory emerges from the recognition that Eurasian connectivity is not politically neutral. Regional infrastructure initiatives are increasingly embedded in broader geopolitical competition among China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and extra-regional actors seeking influence through infrastructure statecraft. Projects associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative, the International North and South Transport Corridor, and competing regional transit corridors often carry strategic conditions that may constrain long-term policy autonomy. Afghan policymakers, drawing lessons from debt dependency, unequal concession agreements, and externally dominated infrastructure governance in other developing states, adopt a more cautious approach to large-scale corridor integration.

Rather than positioning itself as an open transit platform for competing powers, Afghanistan prioritizes limited, diversified connectivity that aligns with domestic development goals. The state selectively supports projects that improve national infrastructure, regional trade access, and energy security without allowing any single external actor to dominate critical transport, mining, or logistics sectors. Smaller-scale bilateral agreements with neighboring states, expanded air corridors, targeted energy partnerships, and controlled transit arrangements become more attractive than large geopolitical megaprojects.

This strategy is made possible by relatively stronger domestic institutions. Improved regulatory capacity, greater bureaucratic coordination, stronger border governance, and more coherent economic planning let the state filter external proposals and negotiate with greater confidence. However, this approach carries clear trade-offs. By avoiding deeper integration into major regional corridors, Afghanistan may forgo large-scale infrastructure financing, transit revenues, and rapid trade expansion. Economic growth under this scenario is likely to be slower, more gradual, and heavily dependent on domestic reform capacity.

Asymmetric Dependent Connectivity

This scenario describes a condition in which Afghanistan becomes formally incorporated into Eurasian infrastructure and trade networks, yet lacks the institutional and bargaining capacity required to shape the terms, direction, and distribution of connectivity outcomes. In this case, integration is real and visible but structurally uneven. Afghanistan is connected to regional corridors but cannot govern how those corridors function meaningfully.

This pathway is strongly shaped by the logic of infrastructure-led geopolitics, in which external actors design and finance connectivity while recipient states primarily absorb predefined development packages. Within the broader Eurasian system, major infrastructure initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative, transport expansions linked to Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and north-south and east-west corridor competition involving Iran, Russia, and Turkey increasingly define the structural environment in which Afghanistan must position itself. However, rather than becoming a code signer of these systems, Afghanistan remains primarily a peripheral participant whose role is largely determined externally.

At the domestic level, institutional weakness is the central constraint shaping this outcome. Limited administrative capacity, fragmented regulatory systems, weak contract

enforcement, and insufficient technical expertise in infrastructure governance significantly reduce Afghanistan's ability to negotiate equitable terms in large-scale infrastructure agreements. Project design, financing structures, and operational control are frequently dominated by external stakeholders. Afghan institutions are often reduced to implementing or endorsing arrangements already defined elsewhere, rather than actively shaping corridor architecture.

Economically, this produces uneven, externally conditioned gains. While connectivity projects generate visible infrastructure development, transit flows, and localized employment effects, benefits remain highly unevenly distributed. Value capture mechanisms such as logistics services, tariff optimization, industrial clustering, and transit pricing are often controlled outside Afghanistan or structured in ways that limit domestic accumulation. The country may experience increased movement of goods and capital, but without corresponding increases in productive transformation or industrial upgrading. Over time, this configuration produces asymmetric interdependence. Afghanistan becomes increasingly embedded in regional systems it cannot meaningfully influence, increasing its exposure to external economic and political leverage. Dependence on transit revenues, foreign-managed infrastructure, and externally coordinated trade routes constrains policy autonomy and narrows domestic development options.

Integration Hub

This scenario represents the most favorable configuration within the spectrum of contested connectivity, in which Afghanistan successfully aligns high levels of external connectivity with strong domestic institutional capacity. Unlike the previous scenarios where Afghanistan is either excluded, selectively engaged, or asymmetrically incorporated, here the country actively shapes, rather than merely absorbs, the dynamics of Eurasian network formation. Connectivity becomes an internally governed development strategy.

This outcome is contingent on a significant transformation in Afghanistan's institutional architecture. Stronger state capacity, improved regulatory coherence, and more professionalized administration enable the government to engage in complex negotiations over infrastructure governance and investment frameworks. Rather than accepting predesigned corridor arrangements, Afghan institutions can co-sign connectivity projects with external actors, ensuring infrastructure development aligns with national development priorities. In this context, Afghanistan transitions from a passive transit space to an active geoeconomic agent within regional systems.

At the regional level, this scenario assumes sustained and diversified engagement with multiple Eurasian actors. Infrastructure initiatives linked to China's Belt and Road Initiative, transit systems such as the International North-South Transport Corridor, and regional connectivity projects involving Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan are strategically integrated into a coordinated national connectivity framework. Afghanistan leverages its geographic centrality at the intersection of Central, South, and West Asian corridors to become a multi-vector transit and logistics hub. The key distinguishing feature of this scenario is the shift from transit exposure to value creation. Afghanistan develops the capacity to capture value through logistics services, customs optimization, warehousing, light industrial

processing, and regional trade facilitation. Transport-linked economic clusters and corridor-adjacent urban development further strengthen domestic productive capacity.

Institutionally, this scenario requires robust governance mechanisms to manage infrastructure complexity. Transparent regulatory systems, efficient border management, credible investment frameworks, and coordinated interagency planning are essential to prevent fragmentation of authority and leakage of value. Strong institutions also enable Afghanistan to mitigate geopolitical pressures arising from competing regional projects, ensuring that engagement with one actor does not generate overdependence or strategic vulnerability. In this scenario, Afghanistan is a connective hub within Eurasian geoeconomic networks. It operates as an intermediary space where multiple connectivity systems intersect, and where value is generated through geography and governance capacity.

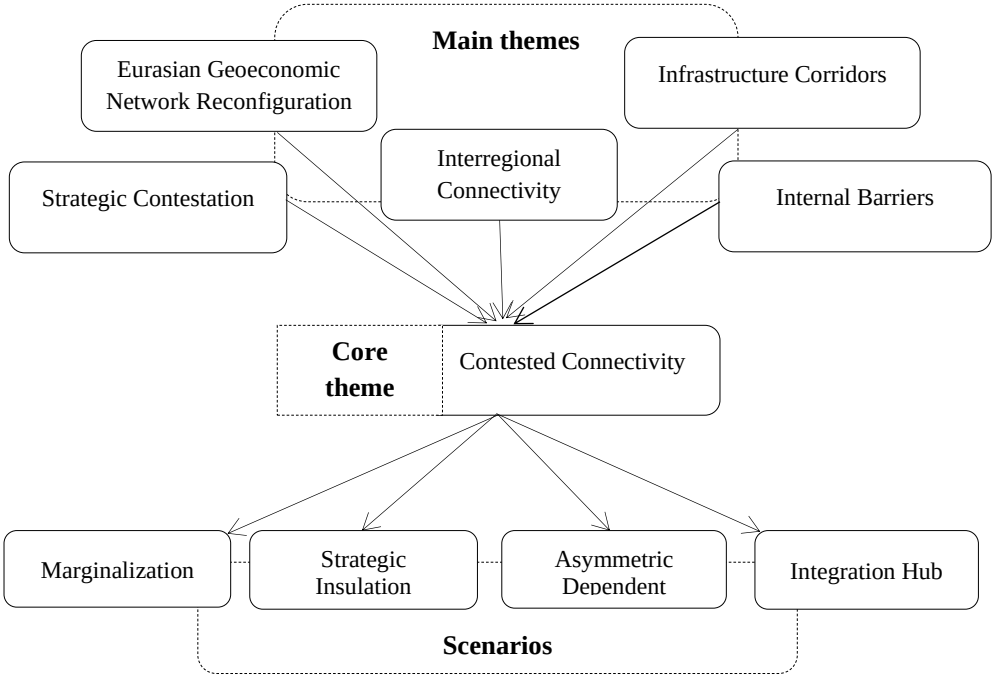


Figure 1: *Conceptual Model*

Figure 1 presents a structured representation of Afghanistan's geoeconomic positioning within Eurasian economic networks. The diagram illustrates a hierarchical relationship in which five main themes directly inform the core theme of Contested Connectivity. These main themes include reconfiguration of Eurasian geoeconomic networks, interregional connectivity, infrastructure corridors, strategic contestation, and internal barriers.

From the core theme, directional links extend to four exploratory scenarios for Afghanistan's development trajectory. These scenarios include marginalization, strategic insulation, asymmetric dependent connectivity, and integration hub. These scenarios represent alternative and nondeterministic outcomes derived from the central condition of contested connectivity. The model therefore provides a simplified conceptual mapping of thematic findings onto a central analytical construct and its associated scenario-based outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that Afghanistan's position within Eurasian geoeconomic networks is shaped by five interrelated dimensions: Eurasian network reconfiguration, interregional connectivity, infrastructure corridors, strategic contestation, and internal barriers.

The first three themes identify the principal mechanisms through which Afghanistan could expand its participation in Eurasian connectivity. The reconfiguration of Eurasian economic networks creates opportunities for new trade relationships and alternative connectivity arrangements. Interregional connectivity highlights Afghanistan's potential intermediary position between Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and China, and infrastructure corridors could provide material channels for these relationships to develop. However, the fourth theme, strategic contestation, shows that connectivity initiatives are embedded in broader competition for regional influence and strategic access. The fifth theme, internal barriers, highlights the institutional, economic, social, and environmental conditions that constrain the capacity to convert external opportunities into sustainable domestic benefits.

The scenario analysis further illustrates the implications of these relationships by identifying four possible development trajectories: marginalization, strategic insulation, asymmetric dependent connectivity, and integration hub development. These scenarios represent different configurations of external engagement and domestic capacity. They suggest that Afghanistan's participation in Eurasian networks may yield divergent outcomes, depending on how regional opportunities, strategic constraints, and internal conditions interact.

In response to the first question, the findings indicate that Afghanistan occupies a potentially significant but structurally constrained position within Eurasian connectivity. Its intermediary location offers opportunities to connect regional markets and infrastructure networks, while the reconfiguration of Eurasian economic relationships and competition over corridors influence the strategic value of these connections. In response to the second question, the analysis identifies four possible trajectories: marginalization, strategic insulation, asymmetric dependent connectivity, and integration hub development.

Afghanistan's location provides potential access to multiple regional economic spaces. However, effective participation in these networks depends on factors beyond geography, including infrastructure development, institutional coordination, political stability, and the ability to negotiate external economic relationships.

This interpretation refines the geographical perspective evident in studies by Saikal (2014), Marsden (2021), Noorzi (2021), Javaid (2024), and Chaghaty and Bagramwal (2025), which emphasize Afghanistan's historical connections and geographical position. The present findings demonstrate why this potential must be assessed in relation to the political, institutional, and economic conditions that determine whether geographic advantages can be translated into effective regional participation.

Studies examining the BRI, the Wakhan Corridor, and Afghanistan's possible role in the International North-South transport corridor identify opportunities to expand regional

connectivity (Tian et al., 2024; Yawar, 2024; Mubariz & Keliwaal, 2024). The present analysis places these opportunities within a broader framework that considers the conditions under which connectivity can generate developmental benefits. Infrastructure corridors improve access to regional markets and facilitate transit.

Freeman's (1978) network perspective highlights the significance of intermediary positions within relational structures. Nevertheless, potential intermediary status does not necessarily confer effective bargaining power. The benefits associated with network positioning depend on whether the intermediary actor can influence connectivity arrangements, maintain reliable connections, and capture economic value from network participation.

Farrell and Newman's (2019) concept of weaponized interdependence offers a complementary perspective on the vulnerabilities associated with asymmetric network structures. Although Afghanistan does not occupy the central network position they emphasize, their framework highlights the possibility that participation in networks dominated by more powerful actors creates dependencies and strategic vulnerabilities. The findings extend this concern to Afghanistan by examining how external dependence, limited institutional capacity, and strategic competition constrain the developmental benefits of connectivity.

Cooley (2012) cautions against reducing Eurasian regional dynamics to simplified competition among major powers, emphasizing the relevance of domestic institutions and local bargaining processes. This perspective aligns with the present study's finding that Afghanistan's position cannot be explained solely through external actors' strategies. Domestic institutional capacity, economic conditions, and the ability to negotiate and coordinate regional initiatives influence how external competition affects the country. Safranchuk (2019) and Yar et al. (2023), as discussed in the literature review, offer further points of comparison on Afghanistan's domestic political conditions and enduring regional significance.

The interaction between external opportunities and domestic constraints also invites a cautious application of Wallerstein's (1974) structural perspective. Afghanistan occupies a geographically significant position within regional economic networks without necessarily exercising corresponding influence over production and value creation. This possibility is reflected in the asymmetric dependent connectivity scenario, in which integration expands but the domestic benefits remain limited. The findings therefore suggest that connectivity's developmental significance must be evaluated not only by the extent of network participation but also by how participation supports domestic economic capabilities and reduces structural dependence.

The four development scenarios provide an analytical interpretation of how different combinations of external and domestic conditions shape Afghanistan's geoeconomic future. The marginalization scenario represents a trajectory in which weak domestic capacity, insecurity, and limited regional participation prevent Afghanistan from translating its geographical position into meaningful connectivity.

The strategic insulation scenario describes a different configuration, in which political isolation and restricted external engagement limit participation in Eurasian networks.

The asymmetric dependent connectivity scenario describes partial participation in regional infrastructure and economic networks without the capacity to capture broader developmental benefits. This scenario is particularly relevant to the literature's concerns about unequal integration and structural dependency (Jabarkhil & Parikh, 2023; Mahmood, 2025). It also links the network vulnerabilities Farrell and Newman (2019) highlight to the structural inequalities associated with Wallerstein's (1974) perspective.

The integration hub development scenario describes a more favorable trajectory in which institutional capacity, improved governance, and sustained regional cooperation support greater participation in Eurasian networks and stronger domestic developmental benefits.

Research challenges include political uncertainty, shifting regional alignments, uneven infrastructure development, and limited access to reliable economic and institutional data. Future research could address these challenges through comparative case studies of regional connectivity, interviews with policymakers and infrastructure stakeholders, and empirical assessments of the economic effects of specific corridors. Further studies could also examine how changes in regional cooperation, domestic institutional capacity, and infrastructure development affect the plausibility of the four scenarios identified in this study.

CONCLUSION

This study examined Afghanistan's position within contested Eurasian geoeconomic networks and explored the development pathways that emerge from the interaction between regional competition and domestic structural conditions.

By integrating perspectives on geoeconomics, network positioning, regional connectivity, and structural constraints, the study provides a conceptual model for understanding why Afghanistan's strategic location has not necessarily translated into sustained economic transformation. The findings indicate that Afghanistan's future within Eurasian connectivity depends on its capacity to attract infrastructure investment and the conditions under which it participates. Connectivity expands access to regional markets and strengthens economic relationships, yet its developmental value depends on the ability to negotiate favorable arrangements, coordinate implementation, and generate domestic economic benefits.

The four scenarios developed in this study marginalization, strategic insulation, asymmetric dependent connectivity, and integration hub development- illustrate the range of possible outcomes arising from different configurations of external engagement and domestic capacity. Ultimately, the developmental significance of Afghanistan's position in Eurasia will depend on whether participation in regional networks can be translated into durable economic capabilities rather than remaining confined to transit opportunities and externally shaped connectivity arrangements.

Funding

The author received no funding for this research and publication

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

Data Availability Statement

Data for this study were obtained from publicly available secondary sources. All sources are cited in the manuscript.

Author contribution

The author was responsible for the conceptualization and design of the study, literature review, data collection, thematic analysis, scenario development, interpretation of findings, and preparation and revision of the manuscript.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank the editor and anonymous reviewers of this article for their constructive comments and valuable suggestions, which helped improve the quality and clarity of the manuscript.

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