Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities
Publisher: Kabul University

Available at https://jssh.edu.af

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor's Role in Afghanistan's Economy-Oriented Foreign Policy under the Islamic Emirate Government

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Received: August 25, 2026
Revised: Sep 7, 2026
Accepted: October 15, 2026
Published: October 30, 2026

Keywords

- Afghanistan
- Economy-Oriented
- Foreign Policy
- Geoeconomics
- Lapis Lazuli Corridor
- Regional Connectivity

Abstract: Afghanistan, as a landlocked country, depends heavily on transit routes through neighboring states for foreign trade and access to regional and international markets. This dependence, combined with the country's strategic location, underscores the importance of using trade corridors as instruments of an economy-oriented foreign policy. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor offers this opportunity by linking Afghanistan to Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Türkiye, and broader markets. Despite growing attention to Afghanistan's trade and regional connectivity, independent analysis of the corridor's role as an active foreign policy instrument remains limited. This study examines the Lapis Lazuli Corridor's role in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's economy-oriented foreign policy. A qualitative case study design was employed, focusing primarily on developments from August 2021 to 2026. The final analytical corpus comprised 25 academic, policy, and institutional sources published between 1982 and 2026, with earlier works used mainly for historical and theoretical context. The study identified relevant literature through Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science, supplemented by official documents and reports from Afghan, regional, and international institutions, and analyzed it thematically. The findings indicate that the corridor can strengthen Afghanistan's geoeconomic and transit position, diversify trade routes and market access, and deepen regional economic connectivity. However, infrastructure deficiencies, transport costs, customs coordination problems, financial constraints, and dependence on sustained interstate cooperation continue to limit its effectiveness as a fully established foreign policy instrument.

To Cite this Article: Kargar, A. A., Azimyar, D. M & Hanifi, M. (2026). The Lapis Lazuli Corridor's Role in Afghanistan's Economy-Oriented Foreign Policy under the Islamic Emirate Government. *Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities 3*(4), 988-1009. https://doi.org/10.62810/jssh.v3i4.433

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INTRODUCTION

In the foreign policy of landlocked countries, geography can be both a source of limitation and opportunity. Lack of direct access to open seas, dependence on other countries' transit

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Available online at https://jssh.edu.af/jssh/article/view/433

routes, and vulnerability to political and trade disruptions can limit these states' economic choices. However, the same geographical position, if managed through an active regional strategy, can become a means of interaction, bargaining, and economic interdependence. Afghanistan clearly illustrates this dual situation. On the one hand, the country faces the limitations of being landlocked. On the other hand, it is located at the intersection of several important economic and geographical regions (Bazwan & Sediqzada, 2024). Therefore, Afghanistan's main challenge is not simply to build more transit routes, but to use them to support its foreign and economic interests.

In this context, an economy-oriented foreign policy becomes important. Such a policy gains meaning when foreign relations rest not only on political and security considerations, but also on trade, transit, investment, market access, and regional cooperation. From this perspective, an economy-oriented foreign policy's success cannot be measured only by the number of diplomatic meetings or agreements signed. A better measure is how far foreign relations create real economic opportunities, reduce the costs of dependence, and give the country more options (Jalili et al., 2025).

In 2021, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's regime officially announced that the country’s foreign policy is based on the following concepts: balance and an economy-based approach (Aghaee & Taheri, 2017). Within this framework, developing economic contacts with regional states, expanding trade and transit, attracting investment, and leveraging Afghanistan's geographic position in regional connectivity are considered components of its foreign policy course (Kakar, 2023). At the same time, the gap between announcing an economy-based policy and implementing it remains significant. Policy moves beyond rhetoric when it uses economic instruments to achieve foreign policy goals. Trade and transit routes are among these instruments.

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor plays a role in this regard. Beyond providing another option for exporting goods from Afghanistan, it also offers the added dimension of being a multinational route and a feature of political geography (Noorzi, 2021). It links Afghanistan through Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. This means economic relationships have been established through this route. Through this, it can be argued that the Lapis Lazuli Corridor is an aspect of Afghanistan's economic diplomacy because it relies on many countries to function.

The corridor's actual importance will be determined by its competitiveness in terms of cost, time, security, predictability, and the quantity of goods transported. If its use is limited, unstable, and expensive, its relevance for foreign policy will remain mainly symbolic. This means the key issue is not the Lapis Lazuli Corridor's importance for Afghanistan in general, but its potential as a tool of economic foreign policy (Omarkhail & Zahid, 2025).

In this respect, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can be considered significant for Afghanistan's foreign policy in at least three respects. First, economically, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can increase the diversity of transportation routes Afghanistan uses for exports and transit. This

will be particularly beneficial for the country, which has long relied on only a few transit routes for foreign trade. Second, diplomatically, the corridor's continued operation will require regular negotiations with states along the route, which, in turn, will help build relations based on mutual economic interest. Third, geoeconomically, creating the corridor will allow Afghanistan to convert a geographic disadvantage into a geographic advantage (Seerat, 2025).

On the other hand, numerous limitations can reduce the competitiveness of the corridor (Pourramezan, 2023). These include the route length, the need to pass through several customs zones, multimodal transport, transportation costs, regulatory disparities, infrastructure gaps in some areas, and financial and banking restrictions. Moreover, the state can use an economy-oriented foreign policy effectively only if its diplomatic goals, domestic economic potential, and infrastructure are compatible. Otherwise, even if the corridor has high political significance, it may not gain the economic significance needed to affect the state's foreign policy.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to examine the role of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor in implementing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's economy-oriented foreign policy, with particular attention to its geoeconomic significance and the factors influencing its effectiveness.

To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following specific objectives:

- To examine the role of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor in strengthening Afghanistan’s geoeconomic position and transit capacity.
- To analyze the contribution of the corridor to diversifying Afghanistan’s trade routes and expanding access to regional and international markets.
- To assess the role of the corridor in strengthening regional economic connectivity and cooperation within Afghanistan’s economy-oriented foreign policy.
- To identify the major challenges and limitations affecting the effective implementation and utilization of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor.

Thus, the main research question of this work will be the following:

- What is the role of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor in the economy-oriented foreign policy of the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan?

The main hypothesis of the work is:

- The Lapis Lazuli Corridor can be an important tool for implementing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's economy-oriented foreign policy if it performs three functions at once: diversifying transit and trade routes, intensifying economic cooperation with countries along the corridor, and improving Afghanistan's geoeconomic potential.

The literature reviewed below was selected based on the relevance, inclusion, and exclusion criteria outlined in the Research Method section, using targeted searches on the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, Afghanistan's economy-oriented foreign policy, geoeconomics, economic diplomacy, trade and transit, and regional connectivity.

Recently, several scholars have examined transit corridors, regional connectivity, and Afghanistan's economy-based foreign policy. While some researchers have emphasized Afghanistan's geographic position and transit capabilities, others have studied the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, route diversification, and economic diplomacy. However, the significance of Lapis Lazuli Corridor for the economy-oriented foreign policy of the government of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is an area that has not been discussed much independently. The pertinent literature is presented below.

Noorzi (2021), in the article *Afghanistan: Regional Connectivity Hub*, examined Afghanistan's potential to become a regional connectivity hub. The study found that Afghanistan's geographical location can change from a limitation caused by its landlocked position into an economic opportunity if infrastructure is developed, regional cooperation is strengthened, and appropriate policies are adopted. However, the study did not examine the Lapis Lazuli Corridor's specific role in an economy-oriented foreign policy.

Kakar (2023), in the article *Afghanistan Towards Independent Transit Trade: A Decay of Affiliation to Pakistan*, showed that Afghanistan's transit dependence on Pakistan declined after 2014 and that routes such as Chabahar, air corridors, and the Lapis Lazuli Corridor contributed to the diversification of Afghanistan's foreign trade. The study highlights the importance of alternative routes, but it mainly focuses on economic and trade aspects and does not independently examine their implications for an economy-oriented foreign policy.

Tariq (2023), in the article *The Importance of Lapis Lazuli Corridor for Afghanistan*, directly examined the importance of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor. The study found that the corridor can expand Afghanistan's access to Central Asian countries, the Caucasus, Türkiye, and European markets, while also providing an alternative route for foreign trade. However, the article focuses mainly on the corridor's trade and transit importance and does not examine its role as a foreign policy instrument.

In Afghanistan as a Bridge between South Asia and Central Asia, Bazwan and Sediqzada (2024) emphasized Afghanistan's potential to connect South Asia and Central Asia. They found that Afghanistan's geographic location offers a major opportunity for trade and regional connectivity, but weak infrastructure and political and security problems may prevent the country from fully realizing this potential. Their study highlights the gap between geographical potential and practical use, but it does not focus on the Lapis Lazuli Corridor.

Shah Khail et al. (2025), in the article *Demystifying the Lapis Lazuli Corridor as a Potential Trade Pathway for Bilateral Growth of Afghanistan and Eurasian Countries*, examined the Lapis Lazuli Corridor as a potential route for expanding trade between Afghanistan and Eurasian countries. The authors emphasized the corridor's economic potential while also

identifying challenges such as political competition, security problems, weak transit management, and transportation limitations. However, this study also considers the corridor mainly as a trade route rather than as an instrument of an economy-oriented foreign policy.

The existing literature reveals a clear analytical gap. Studies focusing specifically on the Lapis Lazuli Corridor have largely treated it as a trade and transit route, emphasizing market access, route diversification, transport connectivity, and economic potential. In contrast, studies of Afghanistan's economy-oriented foreign policy have generally examined geoeconomics, regional cooperation, and economic diplomacy at a broader level without analyzing how a specific corridor may function as a policy instrument. Consequently, previous research has not adequately explained how the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can be deliberately used to reduce transit dependence, structure sustained economic relations with corridor countries and translate Afghanistan's geographic position into foreign policy capacity. This study addresses this gap by examining the Lapis Lazuli Corridor not merely as transport infrastructure, but as an active geoeconomic instrument within the economy-oriented foreign policy of the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Theoretical Framework: Geoeconomics

This study's theoretical framework is based on geoeconomic theory. The concept of geoeconomics became more prominent after the end of the Cold War, when economic tools gained greater importance in state competition and interaction (Omar Shah Khail et al., 2025). Edward Luttwak was among the early scholars to describe geoeconomics as a shift in how states compete. In his view, as direct military confrontation became less important, competition among states did not disappear (Luttwak, 1990). Instead, the tools of competition changed, and trade, investment, technology, resources, infrastructure, and access to markets became more important for protecting national interests.

In simple terms, geoeconomics refers to the strategic use of economic tools and capacities to achieve national and foreign policy goals. In this approach, economics and geography are not separate from politics. A country's geographic location, transport facilities, ports, railway systems, energy sources, markets, and communications can be politically and strategically important, as well as economically valuable (Tonzai et al., 2026). In this regard, a trade route is geopolitically significant not only because it transports goods but also because of its impact on foreign relations and economic choices.

First, a core tenet of geoeconomics is the link between economic power and foreign policy. Under this approach, states can use instruments such as trade, investment, economic assistance, sanctions, energy resources, transit facilities, and infrastructure projects to achieve their interests (Ahmadi Silve et al., 2022). In such cases, a state's power is not characterized by its military capacity. Power also includes the ability to access different markets, build economic networks, control strategic routes, and avoid economic vulnerability.

Second, another significant aspect of geoeconomics is how geography shapes economic possibilities and limits. Location per se does not give a country power. Even if a country is

located at the intersection of different economic regions, a lack of required infrastructure, sound economic policy, and relationships with other states prevents it from using the advantages of its geographic location (Baru, 2012). Geoeconomics distinguishes between geographical position and the strategic use of that position.

This strategy also includes the principles of reducing dependency and broadening economic options. High dependency on a single market, partner, or transit route increases a country's vulnerability. In turn, diversifying trading partners and market routes gives the state more options. Therefore, from a geoeconomic perspective, having several alternative routes is not just an economic benefit but also a strategic asset, as it reduces unequal dependence on a single route or partner.

Geoeconomics pays much attention to the combination of cooperation and competition in the economy (Aghaee & Taheri, 2017). Countries may compete in one sphere and cooperate economically in another one. Transit projects and regional corridors are clear examples of this situation, as their development requires cooperation among several states that also compete to gain economic, transit, and political advantages (Kargar et al., 2026). In this regard, regional corridors cannot be considered merely technical transit infrastructure projects.

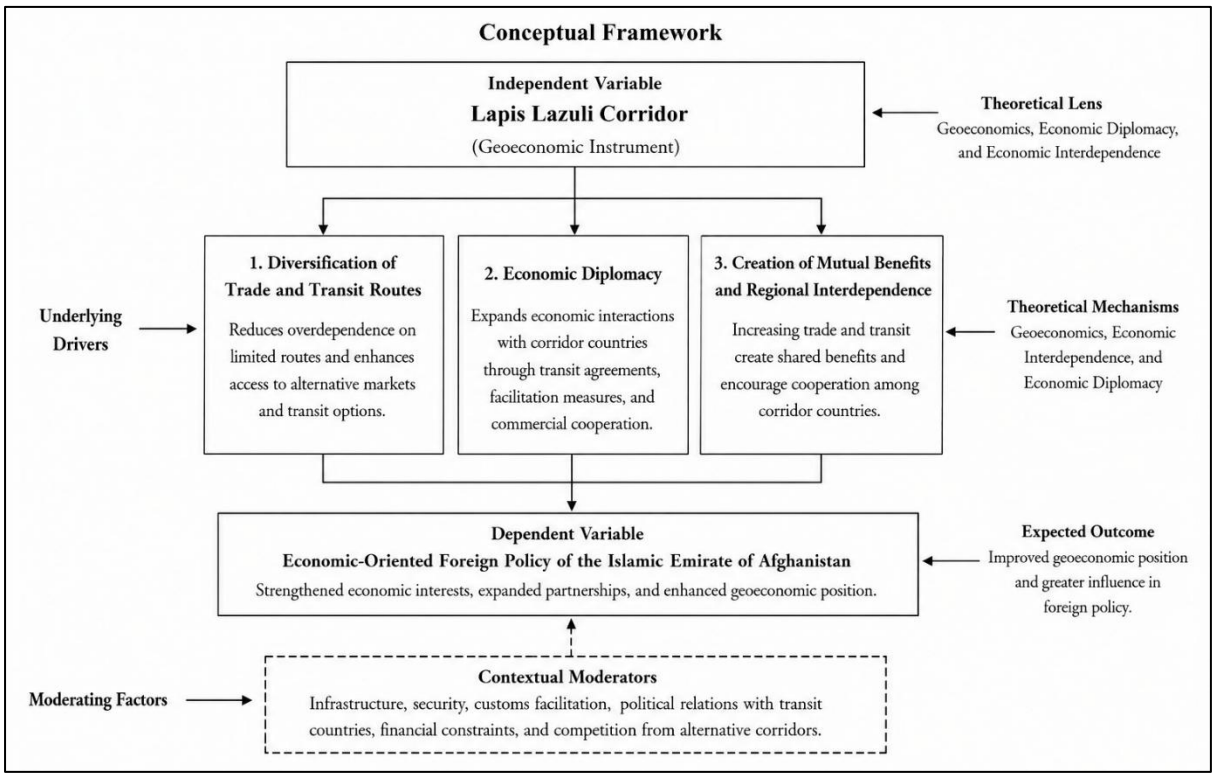


***Figure 1**. Conceptual Framework of the Study*

This theory shows that connectivity infrastructure can also be a geoeconomic resource. Railways, ports, highways, and trade routes gain geoeconomic importance when they expand a country's market access, create new economic connections, or reduce reliance on limited alternatives (Rakhimov, 2010). However, the value of such infrastructure depends on its

actual use, competitiveness, sustainability, and ability to create economic benefits. Therefore, the existence of a corridor alone does not mean that a country has geoeconomic power.

In relation to this study, geoeconomic theory allows the Lapis Lazuli Corridor to be viewed as more than a route for transporting goods. Because Afghanistan is landlocked, it depends on other countries' transit routes. At the same time, its geographical location gives it the potential to connect different regions. From this perspective, if used effectively, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can diversify Afghanistan’s foreign trade routes, expand economic relations with countries along the corridor, and better leverage Afghanistan’s geographic position.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative research approach with a single-case study design to examine the role of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's economy-oriented foreign policy. A qualitative case study design was appropriate because the research seeks to understand the corridor's political, economic, and geoeconomic significance within its specific policy and regional context, rather than measure statistical relationships. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor was selected as the case because it provides a relevant example of how a multilateral transit route may function as an instrument of economic diplomacy and regional connectivity. The study focused primarily on developments from August 2021 to 2026, corresponding to the Islamic Emirate government's period, while including earlier publications to provide historical and theoretical context.

Data Collection

Data was collected through documentary analysis of secondary sources. The final analytical corpus comprised 25 academic, policy, and institutional sources published between 1982 and 2026. These included peer-reviewed journal articles; official documents and statements from Afghan government institutions; documents related to the Lapis Lazuli Corridor; and reports from regional and international organizations. Academic literature was identified primarily through Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science, while relevant institutional documents and reports were obtained from governmental, regional, and international sources. The documentary approach was appropriate because the study primarily examines foreign policy orientations, regional transit arrangements, and geoeconomic developments that can be investigated through existing academic and institutional materials.

Sampling Method and Source Selection

Purposive sampling was used to select documents and publications directly relevant to the research objectives. This non-probability sampling approach was appropriate because the study required information-rich sources that could explain the relationship between the Lapis Lazuli Corridor and Afghanistan’s economy-oriented foreign policy, rather than a statistically representative sample. We selected sources based on their relevance to the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, geoeconomics, economic diplomacy, Afghanistan’s trade and transit relations, and regional connectivity. Priority was given to recent peer-reviewed studies and authoritative

institutional publications. Earlier works were included when they provided important historical or theoretical explanations. Attention was given to documents addressing developments and official policy positions after August 2021. The selection process resulted in a final analytical corpus of 25 sources.

Data Analysis

The collected materials were examined using thematic analysis. First, the selected documents were reviewed, and information directly related to the research question and objectives was extracted. The extracted information was then organized into recurring themes and examined to identify relationships between transit infrastructure, economic diplomacy, and Afghanistan's foreign policy objectives. The analysis focused on four main themes: (1) strengthening Afghanistan's geoeconomic position and transit role, (2) diversification of trade routes and access to new markets, (3) strengthening regional economic connectivity within an economy-oriented foreign policy, and (4) challenges and limitations affecting the implementation of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor. These themes provided the analytical structure for presenting and interpreting the study findings.

FINDINGS

Strengthening Afghanistan's Geoeconomic Position and Transit Role

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor increases Afghanistan's geographical potential to play a transit role in the region by connecting the country through Aqina and Torghundi to Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye (Majidzadeh, 1982). Afghanistan's position along this network can move the country beyond its landlocked status and bring it closer to transport routes connecting Central Asia, the Caspian region, the Caucasus, and Türkiye. This matters for Afghanistan because its geography can support not only its own foreign trade but also a wider regional transport network.



***Figure 2**: Lapis Lazuli Corridor Map, (Kakar, 2023)*

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor is made up of different land and maritime routes. Afghan products enter Turkmenistan via Aqina and Torghundi before moving to Turkmenbashi Port. They are then shipped across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan. The route then passes through Georgia to Türkiye, where Türkiye's transport system provides further connections to Europe (Seerat, 2025). Through this structure, Afghanistan connects to a transportation network that extends beyond neighboring countries to parts of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Türkiye. In this regard, Aqina and Torghundi are not just border crossings.

Torghundi is especially important in the network. It is already one of Afghanistan's main trading gates to Turkmenistan, but its link to the Turkmen rail network will increase opportunities for cargo transport. Further development of the railway network, cargo terminals, warehouses, and logistics will allow Afghanistan to extend transit activity beyond road transportation (Usserova et al., 2025). In addition, the Aqina route connects Afghanistan to the railway network of Central Asia. The presence of both Aqina and Torghundi in the Lapis Lazuli Corridor means Afghanistan has more than one access point to the country's northern and western regions.

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor's geoeconomic importance also stems from its connection to larger regional transport networks. The route across the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus is linked with the Trans-Caspian network and routes leading to Türkiye. Through the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, Afghanistan can therefore become more closely connected with the transport chain between Central Asia and West Asia. This connection takes Afghanistan’s transit role beyond bilateral relations with neighboring countries and places it within wider multilateral regional networks.

At the same time, the Islamic Emirate's economy-oriented foreign policy emphasizes using Afghanistan’s geographic position for economic gain and strengthening the country’s role in regional trade and transit. Under this approach, Afghanistan’s central location gains greater economic value when it is connected with surrounding countries through railways, highways, dry ports, and regional corridors(Rubin & Armstrong, 2003). The Lapis Lazuli Corridor is one such route. For this reason, its role is not limited to transporting Afghanistan’s exports. It also helps expand the country’s overall transit capacity.

A stronger transit role can also increase the importance of locations inside Afghanistan that are connected to the corridor. Herat, because of its location in western Afghanistan and its proximity to Torghundi, can play a more important role in the Lapis Lazuli transport network. Developing railway and logistics infrastructure in this area can improve connections between domestic production, trade centers, and regional routes. If railway links from Torghundi to other parts of Afghanistan are completed and expanded, the corridor's importance can extend beyond a border crossing and connect a larger part of the domestic economy to the regional transit network (Hassanzada & Zabihullah, 2022).

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor also increases Afghanistan’s potential to take part in the movement of goods between different geographical regions. At present, the route is mainly

used for Afghanistan’s exports and imports. However, its structure could allow Afghanistan’s transit role to expand in the future by linking South Asia, Central Asia, and western routes. This potential fits Afghanistan’s location between several important economic regions and offers greater opportunities to leverage the country’s geography.

But Afghanistan's geoeconomic and transit significance within this corridor is still developing. A route's formal capacity does not equal its utilization (Kargar & Fajr, 2026). The amount of cargo carried along a route, the quality of transportation connections, the capacity of seaports and border crossings, the interaction of various means of transportation, and the stability of the flow of trade transactions affect Afghanistan's transit significance. As a result, in its current state, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor does not show that Afghanistan has become a developed transit center. Instead, it demonstrates Afghanistan's potential in this area.

Overall, the geoeconomic importance of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can be seen in three main features: connecting Afghanistan to a multi-country network, strengthening the capacity of border crossings and transit infrastructure in the north and west of the country, and linking Afghanistan with wider routes across the Caspian region, the Caucasus, and Türkiye. These features create greater opportunities for Afghanistan to use its geographical position as an economic and transit asset.

Diversification of Trade Routes and Access to New Markets

One important role of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor in the economy-oriented foreign policy of the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is to expand foreign trade options and reduce dependence on a limited number of traditional routes. Because of its geographical position, Afghanistan has always depended on passing through other countries' territory for trade. Under these conditions, relying on only a few trade routes can make exports and imports vulnerable to border closures, higher transit costs, political disagreements, and changes in transit countries' regulations (Eslami & Ansary Kargar, 2024). By providing a western route, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor expands the choices available to Afghan traders and exporters. It allows goods to be transported through a route different from the usual southern and southeastern routes.

An important feature of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor is that it is not limited to one country or one market. Afghan goods pass through Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia before reaching Türkiye, from where they can be transported to other countries. Therefore, Türkiye can serve not only as a consumer market but also as a connecting point for Afghan goods moving to wider markets. This makes the Lapis Lazuli Corridor different from a purely bilateral trade route and gives Afghanistan access to several markets through one transport network.

The movement of Afghan export shipments through this route in recent years also shows that the corridor has not remained only an agreement on paper. Products such as dried fruit, food items, and other Afghan goods have moved through the Torghundi route, and some have been transported to other locations after arriving in Türkiye. This suggests that the Lapis Lazuli route could serve as an alternative transport route for exporting goods to farther locations

(Eslami et al., 2025). Because a considerable portion of Afghan exports consists of agricultural products, dried fruit, saffron, handicrafts, and other value-added goods, additional routes would give exporters more options.

Diversification of trade routes does not necessarily entail full replacement of the former route by the latter. The primary function of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor is to add another alternative to Afghanistan's current set of foreign trade routes. Each route offers a unique combination of parameters, such as distance, cost, the types of goods transported, the destination, and so on. Therefore, multiple routes allow traders to choose the one that best suits their purposes.

An alternative route may also help mitigate the consequences of disruptions to other trade routes due to changes in border and transit regimes (Tariq, 2023). Foreign trade in Afghanistan has shown that such changes can disrupt goods delivery. As a result, dependence on a single route or a limited number of routes may increase costs for exporters and importers. Creating a western route to Afghanistan through the Lapis Lazuli Corridor will diversify export and import flows. Hence, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor may be seen as an expansion of opportunities for foreign trade.

Besides the existence of a transit route, access to new markets requires some other factors. The regularity of route use matters for traders. Long-term use of the corridor will enable exporters to plan their activities for destination markets with more confidence. By contrast, if traders use the corridor sporadically, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor's influence on Afghanistan's export composition will be minimal (Nincic, 1999). In summary, the available data show that the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can expand Afghanistan's foreign trade opportunities. However, its share in foreign trade remains low because the route is used irregularly and in limited quantities.

Another dimension of this outcome is the ability to decrease the geographical concentration of the markets for Afghanistan’s exports. More possible destinations for Afghan exports mean the country is less dependent on demand in a few markets. Through Türkiye, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor opens access to markets in West Asia and Europe. In some recent shipments, Afghan goods were delivered to markets outside the key corridor countries. This implies that the Lapis Lazuli Corridor's trading function cannot be considered restricted to trade between Afghanistan and the five corridor countries.

In general, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor's role in trade diversification can be understood in three dimensions: opening a new route for foreign trade, providing exporters with more route and destination choices, and gaining market access beyond Afghanistan's neighboring region. Nonetheless, this role is under development (Rasool et al., 2024). To make the Lapis Lazuli Corridor an integral part of Afghanistan's foreign trade, it needs a steady flow of cargo, increased export volumes, and regular use by traders.

Strengthening Regional Connectivity within an Economy-Oriented Foreign Policy

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor offers an opportunity to expand Afghanistan’s economic connectivity with several regional countries. In this way, it supports one of the main priorities of the Islamic Emirate's economy-oriented foreign policy: developing regional cooperation based on economic interests. The corridor's multilateral structure means its operation is not limited to Afghanistan’s relations with one country (Akbari, 2026). Instead, it places Afghanistan within a chain of connections involving Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. In this way, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor provides a multi-country platform for trade, transport, and economic coordination.

Within this structure, Turkmenistan is the first link between Afghanistan and the Lapis Lazuli route and therefore has a special position. The Torghundi and Aqina border crossings connect Afghanistan to Turkmenistan by road and rail, while Turkmenistan’s transport network provides access to the Caspian Sea (Kakar, 2023). This connection moves Afghanistan-Turkmenistan cooperation in transit beyond simple border relations and makes it part of a wider regional network. Azerbaijan and Georgia serve as connecting points between the Caspian region and Türkiye, while Türkiye connects the corridor with western transport networks. Therefore, the corridor's operation depends on continued cooperation among several countries with different locations and transit systems.

This multilateral feature aligns with the Islamic Emirate government's approach to expanding regional economic relations. In an economy-oriented foreign policy, cooperation with regional countries on trade, transit, railways, energy, and investment has become increasingly important. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor enables part of this cooperation to take place through a specific, shared route. In this framework, regional connectivity is not limited to building physical roads (Jalili et al., 2025). It also includes coordination in the movement of goods, customs procedures, transport, railway use, and the facilitation of commercial movement.

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor also extends Afghanistan’s connectivity beyond its immediate neighbors. Afghanistan shares a border with Turkmenistan, but it has no land border with Azerbaijan, Georgia, or Türkiye. Despite this, the corridor creates a continuous economic connection with these countries. This matters for regional connectivity because it extends Afghanistan’s economic relations beyond border geography and links the country to a wider network across Central Asia, the Caspian region, and the Caucasus.

Another important aspect of the corridor’s regional connectivity is its multimodal nature. The route combines road, rail, and sea transport, linking the transport networks of several countries. This structure requires coordination among land ports, railways, seaports, and road networks in member countries. For this reason, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor's connectivity does not depend on a single highway (Bazwan & Sediqzada, 2024). It results from connecting several regional transport networks. For Afghanistan, participation in such a network provides broader access to regional transport systems.

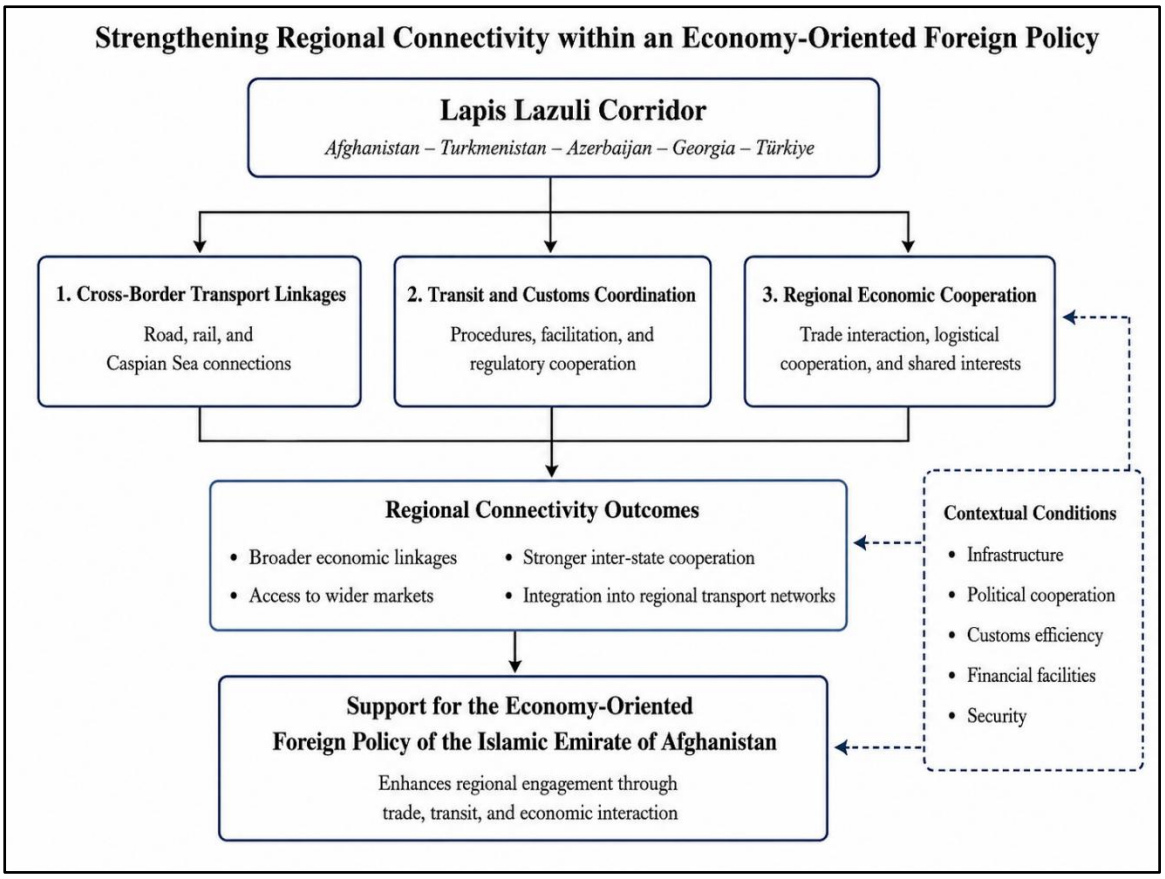


***Figure 3**: Lapis Lazuli Regional Connectivity, (Jalili et al., 2025)*

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor's position in the government of the Islamic Emirate's regional connectivity policy can also be understood alongside other regional projects. In recent years, the government has focused on developing railway links with Central Asian countries, expanding transit routes, and strengthening economic relations with neighboring and regional countries (Noorzi, 2021). The Lapis Lazuli Corridor is one of the routes that covers a different geographical direction by connecting Afghanistan toward the Caspian region, the Caucasus, and Türkiye. For this reason, the corridor can be seen as part of a wider effort to expand Afghanistan's economic connections in different directions.

Cooperation among states within the Lapis Lazuli Corridor also relies on shared interests. The consistent use of this route provides an opportunity for the country to transport cargo. For transit states, it is important because it provides access to transport services, transit services, ports, and other economic services (Omarkhail & Zahid, 2025). Thus, the corridor's functionality depends on the involvement and coordination of all countries along the route. The corridor's dependence on all participating countries makes it not only a national but also a regional project.

In general, regarding the economy-focused foreign policy approach, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor is how Afghanistan is connected to the multi-dimensional regional network. The direct connection with Turkmenistan, transportation across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, and then through Georgia and Türkiye are the major components of this regional connectivity

(Pourramezan, 2023). From this perspective, the corridor serves as a significant mechanism for building economic ties between Afghanistan and other countries along its route and can be a practical tool for promoting regional economic connectivity for the government of the Islamic Emirate.

Challenges and Limitations in the Implementation of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor

Despite the economic possibilities and transit capabilities offered by the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, certain challenges are hampering the project's implementation. As a result, Afghanistan has not harnessed the corridor's full potential, and it has not fully used the corridor as a transport route for international business.

A major issue is the lack of sufficient infrastructure and logistics in some parts of the route (Ahmadi Silve et al., 2022). The Lapis Lazuli Corridor is a multimodal route where cargo is transported by road, rail, and sea across several countries. Within Afghanistan, developing railways, loading terminals, standard warehouses, and logistics at border crossings such as Torghundi and Aqina is also required. Inability to link to this chain can increase transit times and the cost of using this route.

Cooperation between customs and administrative bodies is another constraint. Products that pass through various countries are faced with different sets of regulations, documentation, and modes of transport. Poor coordination of customs practices between member states can create bottlenecks that delay the movement of products (Baru, 2012). Successful implementation of the corridor will thus require simpler processes and information exchange, greater cooperation on transit practices, and the implementation of agreed trade facilitation practices.

One problem is the corridor's cost and competitiveness. Because the corridor passes through many countries and involves multiple modes of transport, including sea transport across the Caspian Sea, costs may be higher for traders. When choosing a trade route, exporters consider more than whether the route leads to a certain place. They also consider factors such as transit cost, transit time, and procedural simplicity (Kargar et al., 2026). Hence, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can become more attractive only if transit costs are competitive.

Afghanistan's financial and banking constraints will also influence the corridor's use for commercial purposes. Trade operations require money transfers, financing, insurance, bank guarantees, and constant connections to other financial systems abroad. Limitations in these areas may complicate trade procedures for businesses and transportation companies, regardless of the route's availability (Rakhimov, 2010). As a result, establishing the corridor will depend not only on roads and transport facilities but also on the financial facilitation of trade.

Furthermore, the corridor's multilateral character will be both an asset and a challenge. The corridor relies on cooperation between Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye (Tariq, 2023). Any changes in legislation, transit policy, or cooperation in one of

these countries will affect the entire transportation process. Thus, coordination among member states is essential for the corridor's stable operation (Usserova et al., 2025).

In general, the key problem of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor is not its untapped potential, but turning that potential into a stable, competitive trade route for Afghanistan. Key issues that will shape the route's future application include infrastructure development, reducing transportation costs and time, customs coordination, more convenient financial transactions, and cooperation among member states.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the Lapis Lazuli Corridor's importance to the economy-oriented foreign policy of the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan goes beyond its basic transit function. The corridor's importance can be understood through the connection between geography, trade, and foreign policy. On the one hand, Afghanistan is landlocked and depends on other countries' transit routes. On the other hand, its location between several important regions gives it the potential to connect these areas. Under these conditions, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can help turn part of Afghanistan’s geographical position into a geoeconomic capacity. However, the findings also show that this potential has not yet resulted in an established transit power. A gap remains between Afghanistan’s potential position and how it actually uses it.

This view aligns with Noorzi (2021), who argues that Afghanistan’s geographical location could make the country a regional connectivity hub if infrastructure, regional cooperation, and appropriate policies are in place. Bazwan and Sediqzada (2024) also distinguish between Afghanistan’s geographical potential and its practical use. This study builds on this discussion by showing that the Lapis Lazuli Corridor is one specific route through which this geographical potential can be pursued within an economy-oriented foreign policy. In other words, Afghanistan’s location between different regions alone is not enough to create a geoeconomic advantage. Geography becomes more important when it is supported by active trade routes, infrastructure, and stable economic relations.

The second finding on trade route diversification also aligns with Kakar (2023). Kakar showed that the development of routes such as Chabahar, air corridors, and the Lapis Lazuli Corridor helped reduce the concentration of Afghanistan’s transit trade on the Pakistan route. However, this study considers the importance of diversification not only from a trade perspective. More available routes can also matter for foreign policy because heavy dependence on one route or transit partner can increase the country’s economic vulnerability. In contrast, having several options provides more flexibility in managing foreign trade. Therefore, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor should not be seen as completely replacing traditional routes. Its main importance is in adding another option and reducing excessive dependence on a limited number of routes.

This finding also correlates with the geoeconomic approach. A major premise of this paradigm is that diversifying markets, partners, and economic pathways can reduce a country's vulnerability and increase its freedom of action. In this light, the state should not judge the Lapis Lazuli Corridor's importance by whether it becomes the most affordable or shortest route for transporting Afghan products. It is enough for the country to have another route even if it plays a minor role in international commerce. But this option can have real impact only if it functions consistently.

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor matters for Afghanistan because it gives it access to Central Asia, the Caucasus, Turkey, and Europe, according to Tariq (2023). In contrast to the above paper, this study highlights the fact that mere access to new markets cannot be used as an indicator of the corridor's effectiveness. While a geographical route to Europe does not automatically imply economic access, the effectiveness of such access will be defined by transport costs, travel time, service continuity, border crossings, and the competitiveness of Afghan products in the destination market.

Regarding regional connectivity, the results show a strong link between the multilateral character of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor and states' economy-centered foreign policy. Cooperation among Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye is needed for the corridor to function successfully. In other words, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor is more than a road in this respect; it is a tool for integrating Afghanistan into regional interactions through trade relations. This aligns with Noorzi's argument that regional connectivity generates common interests between countries.

The findings of Shah Khail et al. (2025), which examine the potential of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor as a tool for increasing Afghan trade with Eurasian states, also support this position. In their view, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor has great potential for regional trade, but it also needs further improvement by strengthening transit agreements between states. An important element of the present study is that the need for such multilateral cooperation in the corridor is both its advantage and disadvantage.

In other words, regional connectivity under the economy-focused foreign policy should not be evaluated solely by the volume of transit projects. More importantly, it depends on whether such projects will lead to continuous and stable economic connections. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor can be an effective instrument for ensuring regional connectivity if participating countries move beyond political statements and achieve practical coordination on cargo transportation, customs, transit, and payment settlement. Thus, the corridor's efficiency cannot depend on Afghan policy alone.

These obstacles align with the findings of Shah Khail et al. (2025), who identified security threats, poor management of the transit route, political rivalry, and economic constraints as obstacles to the corridor's proper functioning. Apart from these problems, some other difficulties like the complication of multimodal transportation, poor coordination among custom administrations, cost of transportation, and financial and banking constraints were

also observed in the current study. These findings show that adopting economy-focused foreign policies depends on more than political will.

It also aligns with Tonzai et al. (2026) study of economic diplomacy in Afghanistan. According to the authors, Afghanistan's geoeconomics is a significant strength; however, several institutional, financial, and operational constraints prevent it from becoming a sustainable strength. In other words, Lapis Lazuli Corridor can be regarded as an example of the dissonance between "geoeconomic potential" and "geoeconomic utilization." All three components are present: geography, route, and a multilateral treaty. However, the actual effect of these components depends on their successful use in practice.

Table 1: *Comparison of the Present Study Findings with Previous Studies*

Main area of findings	Finding the present study	Comparison with previous studies
Strengthening Afghanistan's geoeconomic position and transit role	The Lapis Lazuli Corridor increases Afghanistan's ability to use its geographical position economically and participate more in regional transit networks, but this position is not yet fully established.	This finding is consistent with Noorzi (2021) and Bazwan and Sediqzada (2024), who emphasized Afghanistan's geographical potential to become a regional connectivity hub. This study differs by focusing specifically on the Lapis Lazuli Corridor and its relationship to an economy-oriented foreign policy.
Diversification of trade routes and access to new markets	The Lapis Lazuli Corridor provides an alternative western route and expands Afghanistan's access to Türkiye and markets beyond neighboring countries.	This finding aligns with Kakar (2023) on reducing dependence on traditional routes and Tariq (2023) on the corridor's potential to provide access to new markets. The present study examines this diversification in relation to an economy-oriented foreign policy.
Strengthening regional connectivity within an economy-oriented foreign policy	The corridor's multilateral structure places Afghanistan within a network of economic and transit cooperation with Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye.	This finding aligns with Noorzi (2021) on the role of regional connectivity in creating shared interests and Shah Khail et al. (2025) on the Lapis Lazuli Corridor's potential to expand trade with Eurasian countries. This study treats connectivity as part of an economy-oriented foreign policy.
Challenges and limitations in implementing the Lapis Lazuli Corridor	Weak infrastructure, high transport costs, the complexity of the multimodal route, poor customs coordination, financial limitations, and dependence on cooperation among route countries are major barriers to the corridor's full use.	This finding is consistent with Shah Khail et al. (2025), who identified security, management, economic, and transport problems as major barriers. The present study also emphasizes financial and banking limitations and the route's competitiveness.
Overall assessment of the role of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor	The corridor aligns with the goals of the Islamic Emirate's economy-oriented foreign policy, but its potential exceeds its current practical use.	Previous studies have mainly examined trade, transit, regional connectivity, or Afghanistan's geoeconomic potential separately. This study connects these elements by examining the Lapis Lazuli Corridor within the Islamic Emirate's economy-oriented foreign policy.

Overall, the discussion of the findings and their comparison with previous studies shows that the Lapis Lazuli Corridor aligns with three main elements of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's economy-oriented foreign policy: leveraging the country's geoeconomic

position, diversifying foreign trade options, and strengthening regional economic connectivity. However, this does not mean the corridor's role has been fully realized. Infrastructure, financial, operational, and multilateral limitations still create a gap between its potential and its actual use.

Therefore, under current conditions, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can be considered a developing geoeconomic instrument in the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's economy-oriented foreign policy. Its importance lies in providing new options and creating opportunities to use Afghanistan’s geographical position for economic purposes. However, its establishment as a foreign policy instrument will depend on regular trade flows, greater route competitiveness, infrastructure development, and continued cooperation among member countries.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's economy-oriented foreign policy, focusing on its geoeconomic significance, contribution to trade diversification, role in regional connectivity, and the challenges affecting its effective implementation. The findings indicate that the corridor represents an important potential instrument for advancing Afghanistan’s economic and foreign policy interests. However, infrastructural, financial, operational, and institutional constraints limit its actual contribution.

First, the findings show that the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can strengthen Afghanistan’s geoeconomic position and transit role by connecting the country to broader transportation networks that extend through Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. Through the Aqina and Torghundi border crossings, Afghanistan can expand its participation in regional trade and transit networks. Nevertheless, these connections do not automatically make Afghanistan a major regional transit hub. Achieving this position requires further infrastructure development, improved logistics, and regular commercial utilization of the corridor.

Second, the study found that the corridor diversifies Afghanistan’s trade routes and offers potential access to regional and international markets. By providing an alternative western trade route, it can reduce excessive dependence on a limited number of traditional transit routes and create additional opportunities for Afghan exporters and traders. Its significance, therefore, lies not in replacing existing routes but in expanding the country's trade options. However, the extent of these benefits depends on transportation costs, transit efficiency, market competitiveness, and the continuity of commercial activities.

Third, the findings highlight the corridor’s potential to strengthen regional economic connectivity and cooperation. Its multilateral structure creates opportunities for sustained economic engagement between Afghanistan and the participating countries through trade, transportation, customs coordination, and transit cooperation. In this respect, the Lapis Lazuli

Corridor is more than a transportation route; it can serve as a practical mechanism for implementing an economy-oriented foreign policy by connecting Afghanistan's economic interests with those of regional partners. Nevertheless, its effectiveness depends on continued cooperation and coordination among all participating states.

Fourth, the study identified several major challenges that limit the corridor's effective implementation. These include inadequate transportation and logistics infrastructure, high transit costs, complex customs procedures, financial and banking limitations, and the difficulties of coordinating multimodal transportation across multiple countries. These challenges show that geographical advantages and formal transit agreements alone cannot ensure economic benefits. The corridor's success requires improvements in infrastructure, institutional coordination, financial facilitation, and the competitiveness of transportation services.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Lapis Lazuli Corridor aligns with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's economy-oriented foreign policy objectives, particularly strengthening the country's geoeconomic position, diversifying trade routes, and expanding regional economic cooperation. However, its current significance is more evident in the opportunities it offers than in its demonstrated economic outcomes. The corridor should therefore be understood as a developing geoeconomic instrument whose effectiveness depends on transforming existing opportunities into regular, competitive, and sustainable trade and transit activities.

The study reinforces the distinction between geoeconomic potential and geoeconomic utilization. It demonstrates that geographical location and transport connectivity acquire strategic importance when supported by functioning infrastructure, viable commercial activities, and sustained interstate cooperation. The study contributes to the existing literature by examining the Lapis Lazuli Corridor not merely as a trade and transportation route but as a potential instrument of economy-oriented foreign policy. Future research could further examine its practical effectiveness through comparative and quantitative assessments of trade volumes, transportation costs, transit times, and the experiences of traders and transport companies.

Author contribution

Dost Mohammad Azimyar and Marwa Hanif designed the study framework and collected the relevant and appropriate sources. Author Alireza Ansary Kargar analyzed the data, wrote, and submitted the manuscript. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors also thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Funding Information

This research received no external funding

Data Availability

Data will be available on request

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