

## NEW SILK ROAD

# Why Afghanistan Is Destined to be A Prime Node of the ‘Belt and Road’

by Ramtanu Maitra

Feb. 4—For the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project to achieve what it has set out to achieve—that is, economic development on a foundation of connectivity—Afghanistan must become a prime center in Asia. Located at the cusp of three distinctly separate—and yet integral—parts of Asia, Afghanistan over the millennia has been the corridor through which cultural and trade exchanges across Asia, from one end to the other, have taken place. The same corridor was traversed by many invading armies.

Afghanistan nestles between South Asia, on its south and east; Central Asia, on its north; and the Southwest Asia, with Iran on its western border. China’s OBOR has connected the northern part of Asia to the Eurasian landmass through Central Asia and Russia. China is also in the process of linking South Asia to other parts of the world with new and upgraded ports on the Arabian Sea, which will help the OBOR link up with Africa and Europe—China’s proposed Maritime Silk Road.

Without Afghanistan’s full participation, OBOR could still have access to Southwest Asia and beyond through Turkmenistan and Iran, but then South Asia would remain separated and not linked to OBOR’s westward land routes. In addition, Afghanistan’s strategic geographic position, bountiful mineral reserves, and other natural resources make it an important nation in intraregional trade and energy networks, both as a provider and a transit hub.

So when a Chinese train pulled into the railway station in August 2016 in the northern Afghanistan town of Hairatan, bordering Uzbekistan, hopes rose. The train



Government of Turkmenistan  
*Celebrating the opening of the Afghan-Turkmen railway's first section, Nov. 28, 2016. Dancers at Ymamnazар (Turkmenistan) railway station hold aloft a banner of the train. Presidents of the two countries then secured the bolts of the “golden juncture” at the border crossing, to stormy applause.*

delivered more than a load of textiles and freight, it brought expectations. That train’s 13-day, 700 kilometer journey was full of zig-zags, travelling through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to reach the Afghan border. Hairatan—in Balkh province and situated on the Amu Darya (Amu River)—is both a dry port and a river port on the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan border, and is linked to Termez in Uzbekistan’s railway network. The extension of the Termez-Hairatan railway link into Mazar-e-Sharif, the second largest city in Afghanistan with a population close to 700,000, had long been identified as a top government priority, and it is now in place. The Hairatan-Mazar-e-Sharif rail link was established in 2012, and since 2015 is maintained by the Uzbek national railway, UTY.

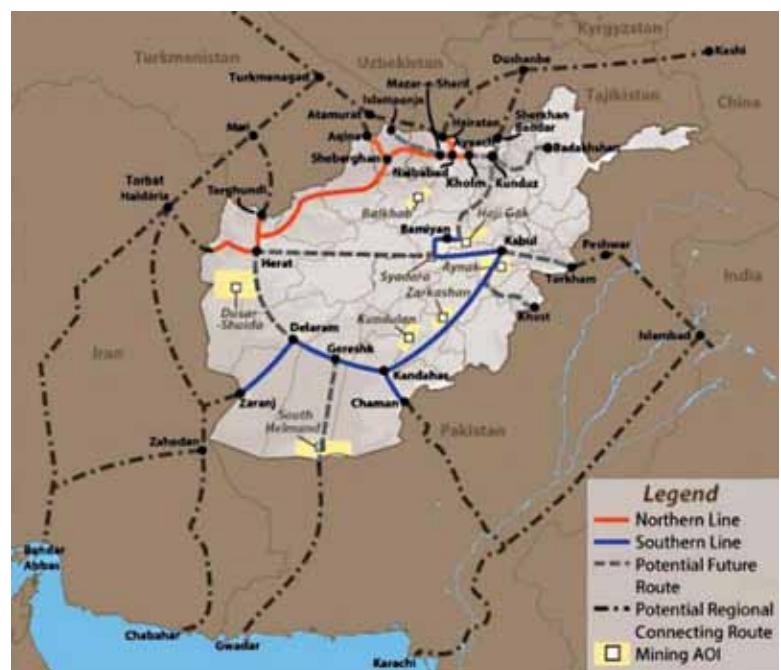
But as a nation ravaged by foreign invasions and a still ongoing civil war of almost four decades, Afghanistan remains perhaps the most insecure nation in Asia,

depending heavily on aid money for its daily sustenance. It simply does not have the means to carry out large capital investments until it is made secure. As a result, Afghanistan has no internal railroad network. At present, it is planning to link some of its border towns with its neighbors' railroads, but a fuller plan for a national railway, drawn up by the Afghanistan Railway Authority, is still only on paper (see map).

## At Last, Rail Links to Neighbors

On its east, Afghanistan borders Pakistan along the poorly marked and wholly disputed 2,640 kilometer Durand Line. The border was established after the 1893 Durand Line Agreement was reached between the Government of the British Raj (the British Government of India) and Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, for fixing their respective spheres of influence, in the context of the “Great Game” between the British and Russian empires. The demarcation was never accepted by Afghanistan. It is astonishing that even today, no functional rail link exists between the two neighboring countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan, with such a long common border.

To its north, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan have recently agreed to develop a major rail link. A railroad from Atamyrat in Turkmenistan to the Ymamnazar border crossing point (85 km) and Afghanistan's customs facilities at Akina (3 km) was officially opened on



*The Afghanistan National Railway Plan, developed by the Afghanistan Railway Authority, follows the “ring road” concept. The Northern Line, focused on general freight, will have Russian and standard gauges. The Southern Line, focused on mineral freight, will have standard gauge. Mining areas of interest are noted.*

November 28, 2016 by Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani. Construction had begun in June 2013. This route is also known as the Lapis-Lazuli Railroad, a reference to this historic export corridor along which Afghanistan's lapis lazuli and other semiprecious stones were exported to the Caucasus, Russia, the Balkans, Europe, and North Africa more than 2,000 years ago. Forty-six rail cars of the first cargo train—loaded with flour, grain, cement, urea for fertilizer, and sulphur came to Akina—traveling over two railway bridges along the 88 km Atamyrat-Ymamnazar(Turkmenistan)-Akina (Afghanistan) section.

Plans are afoot to extend this railroad to Tajikistan. That project is known as the TAT Railway (for Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan), which will link Turkmenistan through northern



*Tanker cars on Afghanistan's rail line that links Mazar-e-Sharif with Hairatan on the Uzbekistan border.*

Afghanistan to the Tajik border. The length of the extended railroad will be around 640 km and would run to Andkhoy, then east via Sheberghan to meet the existing line from Uzbekistan to Mazar-e-Sharif. It will cross the river to enter Tajikistan, terminating at Kolkhozabad on the existing railway from Uzbekistan to Qurghonteppa (formerly Kurgan-Tyube). But this route is not yet certain—variations are being considered.

The Atamyrat-Akina railroad is the second cross-border railway between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. A short, Soviet-built line goes to a freight terminal at the Afghan border town of Towraghondi, north of Herat.

Looking west, construction of a 191 km railway linking Afghanistan to Iran—from Herat to Khaf—is progressing. Herat is the most important city in west Afghanistan, where Iran has made notable investments over decades. Tehran has completed its segment which, from the Iranian town of Khaf (connected to Iran's main railroad), heads slightly south and then east. The line will cross the border through arid and rugged terrain. On the Afghan side, according to local officials, construction work has begun.

By establishing rail links with Turkmenistan and Iran, in particular, Kabul is indicating its priority to link up regionally in Afghanistan's north and west. But recently, discussions have begun in another direction, for a rail connection between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Beijing has shown interest in developing this link, and in May 2016, Pakistani media reported that a survey for a Jalalabad-Peshawar railway (150 km) would start soon, quoting Masood Amin, adviser to the Afghan Ministry of Public Works. Jalalabad and Peshawar both lie near a line drawn between Kabul and Islamabad.

### **Access to Chabahar Port**

In May 2016, leaders of Afghanistan, India, and Iran signed the Chabahar Port agreement in Tehran. Afghanistan is expected to have multi-modal (sea and land) access through the strategic Chabahar Port in Iran, to South Asia, East Asia, and Africa, by the end of this year. Work on the port began last year as a joint venture of Kandla Port Trust and Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust.



*Afghanistan's Garland Highway or Ring Road connects the major cities—Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar City, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif. Much of the 2,210 kilometer road is in disrepair.*

Azizullah Karimi

Afghanistan's Garland Highway (or Ring Road) can be reached from Chabahar Port using the existing Iranian road network and the Zaranj-Delaram road, constructed by India in 2009. The road connects Zaranj on the Iran border with the Ring Road at Delaram.

Now on the drawing boards is a rail link between Chabahar Port and Zahedan (Iran), close to the intersection of the Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan borders and about 200 km from Zaranj. The Indian state-owned IRCON has an agreement with the Construction, Development of Transport, and Infrastructure Company (CDTIC) of Iran to build the link at a cost of \$1.6 billion, as part of the transit corridor to Afghanistan.

### **A Ring Road in Poor Repair**

With no railway network that criss-crosses and unites Afghanistan, efficient movement within the country depends entirely on the 2,210 km Ring Road, a highway that lies inside Afghanistan like a garland. It is the only transport system that not only connects many Afghans within the country, but also connects with Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran.

Construction of the Ring Road began in Herat province bordering Iran. From there it goes south, passing through Nimruz, Farah, and Helmand provinces before reaching Kandahar. The road continues through the eastern provinces of Zabul, Ghazni, Wardak, Kabul, and Parwan. It then passes through Baghlan to reach

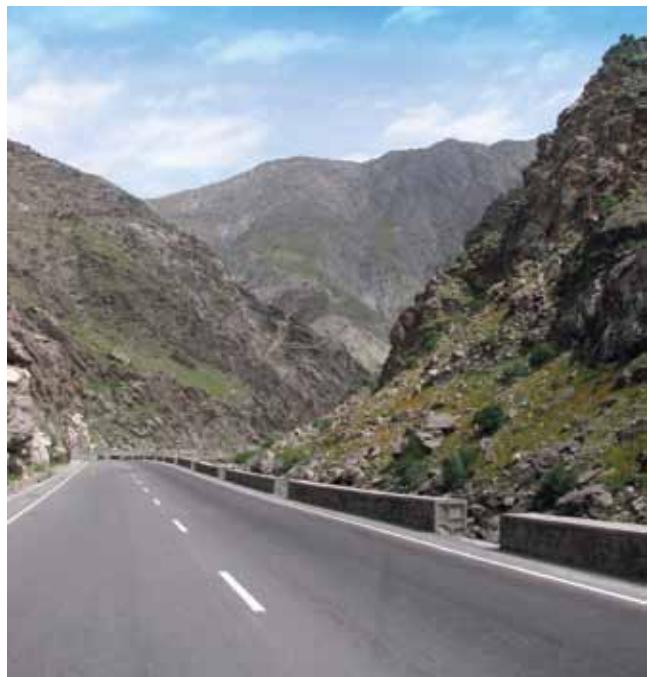
Balkh in the north. From Balkh province, which borders Uzbekistan, it turns west through Jowzjan, Faryab, and Badghis provinces before returning to Herat and completing the garland. But the last segment, connecting Akina on the Turkmenistan border with Herat, still has 233 km of road missing. There are some entirely unpaved stretches of dirt track.

The ongoing armed conflict engulfing most of Afghanistan has significantly damaged the condition of the Ring Road and the regional road networks. The U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), John Sopko, in his October 2016 report, pointed out that the billions of dollars spent by USAID and the U.S. Department of Defense have done little to restore the full functionality of these roads. He [wrote](#),

SIGAR selected and assessed the condition of 1,640 kilometers of U.S.-funded national and regional highways, or approximately 22 percent of all paved roads in Afghanistan. The results indicate that most of these highways need repair and maintenance. For example, SIGAR performed inspections of 20 road segments and found that 19 segments had road damage ranging from deep surface cracks to roads and bridges destroyed by weather or insurgents. Moreover, 17 segments were either poorly maintained or not maintained at all, resulting in road defects that limited drivability. MOPW [Ministry of Public Works] officials acknowledged that roads in Afghanistan are in poor condition. In August 2015, an MOPW official stated that 20 percent of the roads were destroyed and the remaining 80 percent continue to deteriorate. The official added that the Kabul to Kandahar highway is beyond repair and needs to be rebuilt. USAID estimated that unless maintained, it would cost about \$8.3 billion to replace Afghanistan's road infrastructure, and estimated that 54 percent of Afghanistan's road infrastructure suffered from poor maintenance and required rehabilitation beyond simple repairs.

## A Transportation Network Is Crucial

Afghanistan has very difficult terrain. Larger than France, but with less than half of France's population, it is dominated by the Hindu Kush mountain range and its extending ranges to the west. The 800 km (500 mile) Hindu Kush descends to the valley of the Amu Darya



CC/Todd Huffman

*On the road from Kabul to Jalalabad, toward Pakistan.*

on the north and the Indus River valley on the south. The Hindu Kush straddles the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier and crosses Afghanistan in a generally southwestward direction, gradually diminishing in altitude until, opposite Kabul (and to its west), the main ridge is from 15,000 to 20,000 feet high. One hundred miles or so northwest of Kabul, the Koh-i-Baba range—overlapping the western extremity of the Hindu Kush with which it is connected by the Shibar Pass—prolongs the watershed to the west past Bamiyan. On the northeastern side of the Hindu Kush—

Round the Kunar Valley and in Nuristan, the deep ravines and precipitous slopes are clad with magnificent forests of deodar, pine and larch. Further west the slopes and ridges are bare and brown. In the narrow valleys where the swift-running streams, snow-fed from the peaks above, make irrigation possible. Although in some high valleys are to be found stretches of grasslands, the general impression of the great range is of a wild, desolate little-known country, a country of great peaks and deep valleys, of precipitous gorges and rushing grey-green rivers. (W.K. Fraser-Tytler, *Afghanistan: A study of Political Developments in Central and Southern Asia*, 1950)

So wrote a historian who traveled through Afghanistan. Only a transport network can unite such a land.

## The Many Peoples

These natural barriers created by the Hindu Kush range, and the lack of transportation networks, have kept Afghanistan's ethnic groups as varied as ever. The Pashtuns, whose original home in the region was the Suleiman Range on the eastern border of Pakistan's Balochistan province, have their own language, Pashto. Although it is difficult to pin down their origin, it is likely they are of Turko-Iranian stock with a generous admixture of Indian blood. Among them are the Ghilzais, a large community among the Pashtuns. Some historians claim the Ghilzais are of Turkish stock and were pre-eminently a nomad people grazing sheep and cattle, who moved from one grazing pasture to another seasonally. Hundreds of years ago they were prominent in the Kabul and Ghazni areas, but more recently they have spread southwards.

In the north, Tajiks, a non-nomad people of Persian origin, and the Uzbeks, of Turkish origin, dominate. The Tajiks are settled mostly around Kabul, in Kohistan and the valley of the Panjshir River, and in the northeast beyond the Hindu Kush in the valley of upper Amu Darya. Uzbeks are found all along the plains from Murghab River on the west to Faizabad in the Badakhshan province in the east. They are farmers and breed Turkmen horses and the famous Karakul sheep. There is also a small community of Turkmen along the south-



CC/Steve Evans

*The Blue Mosque of Mazar-e-Sharif, where Ali bin Abi Talib, son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad and founder of Shi'a Islam, is interred.*

ern bank of the Amu Darya. There are Kyrgyz living on the upper reaches of Amu Darya, in the narrow Wakhan corridor that ends at the border with China's Xinjiang province. Their ancestors probably migrated from eastern Siberia.

Several hundred thousand Nuristanis live at high elevations along small river valleys in northeast Afghanistan, along the border with Pakistan, north of Kabul and Jalalabad and south of the Wakhan corridor. The Nuristanis believe they are either related to the Greek occupying forces of Alexander of Macedon that invaded the region in about 330 BCE, or to the tribes of Mecca who rejected Islam.

In Afghanistan's west, known as the Hazarajat, live the descendants of Tatar regiments brought to Afghanistan by Chinggis Khan. The Tatars are a result of the combination of ethnicities that allied with Chinggis Khan's Mongols in their wars across Eurasia. The Hazaras, a large community, most of whom are Twelver Shi'a, are also found in Baghlan, Samangan, Balkh, Jawzjan, and Badghis provinces. There are close to 750,000 Hazaras living in Afghanistan and almost a million spread over Iran and Pakistan. Hazaras have a very strong presence in Central Afghanistan, living in pastoral lands situated among narrow valleys, rugged mountain slopes, and turbulent rivers.

The dispersion of cultures cries out for a transportation network, to enable the peoples to become participants in a single nation.



*Hazara family in Afghanistan. The Hazaras are descended from Tatar regiments of Chinggis Khan. Note indication of tillage, upper left.*

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## Mineral Extraction Awaits Stability

In addition to inadequate transportation, the organized opium cultivation that profits many, from bankers to bandits, has turned Afghanistan into a center of permanent conflict and insecurity. Thousands of tons of opium are produced annually under the watch of thousands of NATO troops. The cash generated from opium cultivation not only feeds the world's cash-short banks and other vultures, but provides insurgents with arms and cash to carry out destruction and prolong Afghanistan's instability. Unless this menace is completely eradicated, OBOR, or any other plan to build up Afghanistan, will have no effect whatever. On the other hand, once Afghanistan is stabilized, it could become a truly prosperous nation, while playing a major role as the hub and meeting point of Central Asia, South Asia, and Southwest Asia in the China-led OBOR.

Unlike many Central Asian nations, but like South Asian nations, Afghanistan is not an oil producing country. The country imports petroleum products such as diesel, gasoline, and jet fuel from Pakistan and Uzbekistan, with limited volumes from Turkmenistan and Iran. But Afghanistan is rich in mineral wealth and also has the potential to become an exporter of agricultural products. U.S. hydrologists and mining engineers are working with Afghans southeast of Kabul in conducting tests to determine where mining is feasible. It could take up to 10 years for new mine operations to be established. The deposits are mainly of copper, but also include gold, iron ore, uranium, and precious stones such as emeralds.

Afghanistan's Mes Aynak site, 40 km southeast of Kabul, reportedly has \$100 billion in copper resources underground. In 2008 Kabul awarded a 30-year concession for mining to MCC, a Chinese joint venture. The copper mine development will produce annually approximately 200,000 tons of copper cathode or an equivalent amount of copper concentrate. MCC proposed to build a coal-fired power plant and supply 50 per cent of the power generated to Kabul and the surrounding community, and build a railroad to Xinjiang. Kabul considers Mes Aynak, which is expected to generate about 7,000 jobs, to be a crucial project. Mes Aynak also offers the opportunity to serve as a major anchor project for the development of upstream, downstream, and side-stream linkages as well as ancillary infrastructure that will drive economic growth. The proj-



Afghanistan's largest copper deposit is here at Mes Aynak, near Kabul.

ect, however, has not taken off.

Mes Aynak is host to a trove of archeological ruins in a settlement that includes Buddhist statues, stupas (shrines), and a monastery complex dating from the time of the ancient Silk Road, when this area was a part of Gandhara. Gandhara provided major cultural impulses eastward along the Silk Road, including Greco-Buddhist sculptural styles. The settlement reached the peak of its prosperity in the fifth century CE. There are also remains at a lower level that date to the Bronze Age, about 3,000 BCE. International efforts are afoot to prevent or greatly delay the exploitation of the copper deposits, which would destroy any remains that had not been rescued. The motivation, however, is a combination of bad and good intentions.

Another major mining project that is yet to take off is the plan for an iron ore mine at Hajigak in Bamiyan Province, west of Kabul. Hajigak is the largest iron ore oxide deposit in Afghanistan—with 1.8 billion metric tons of ore—and is also Asia's largest untapped iron ore deposit. Seven of its 16 zones have been studied in detail. While concessions have been discussed with the Indian consortium SAIL-Affisco, consisting of seven companies with support from India's government, contracts have not been signed and no work is underway in Hajigak.

Stability is a key to progress in mining.

## Eradicate Opium, Modernize Agriculture

Wheat is Afghanistan's most important crop, followed by barley, corn, and rice, grown mostly in the northern plains, a region that extends eastward from the Iranian border to the foothills of the Pamir mountain range near the Tajikistan border. Cotton is another im-

portant and widely cultivated crop. Fruit and nuts are among Afghanistan's most important exports. Afghanistan is noted for its unusually sweet grapes and melons, grown mostly in the southwest, north of the Hindu Kush, and in the fertile regions around Herat. Raisins are also an important export. Other important fruits are apricots, cherries, figs, mulberries, and pomegranates. However, the absence of adequate irrigation networks, and the lack of dams and reservoirs to facilitate such irrigation networks, has limited Afghanistan's agriculture. Because of the lack of dams and reservoirs, much of the water flows into neighboring countries or is wasted in the deserts.

In the southern part of the country, where desert-like plains abut Iran, an extensive railroad network can be developed to facilitate transport between agricultural lands and urban centers. A well-fed population will be more healthy and productive and, over the years, will be capable of greater diversity in its pursuit of future options. The agricultural sector will require agro-machinery such as tractors, harvesters, and hoeing machines. The manufacturing and maintenance of such machinery will introduce industries that will train skilled workers and technicians.

## Agriculture to Build the Nation

The most fundamental benefit of a successful, modern agricultural sector lies in what it builds into the nation. Such an agricultural sector requires power, water, sufficient manpower, development of agro-industries, and a transportation network throughout the country. A successful agricultural sector needs concerted effort, and if the importance of the agricultural sector is fully understood, and developed in depth, it provides a shield against external manipulation. The process itself develops skilled manpower.

Basic agricultural institutions include research and extension services that create agronomists who live in the country, work to develop high-yield varieties of seeds, and improve undernourished land. Development of water resources—including irrigation and water supply for the agro-industries and the population in general—produces engineers and technicians who build dams, canals, and flood plains. These actions themselves protect the soil, the land, and the environment in general.

*Ramtanu Maitra is the author of many analyses of South and Central Asia, including “[Long-Term Planning for a Post-War Afghanistan](#),” Executive Intelligence Review, Aug. 13, 2010.*

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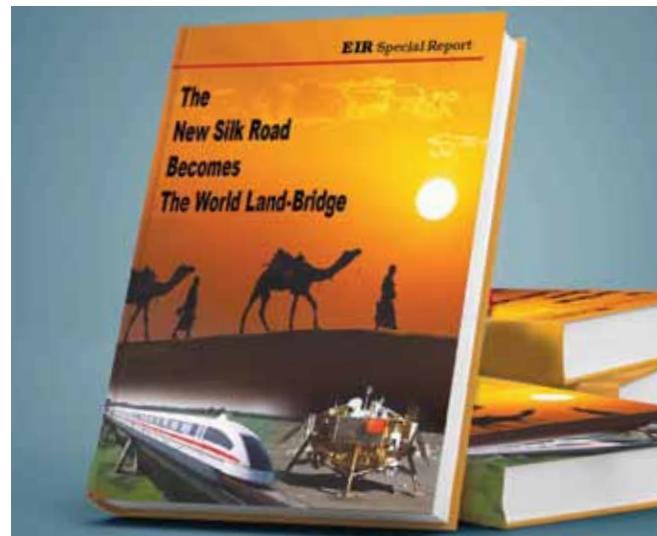
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