

Taliban Government Seeks BRI Link-Up, Has a Packed Infrastructure Agenda

by Marcia Merry Baker

Oct. 28—At the invitation of China, the Taliban government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) attended the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF), Oct. 17–18, in Beijing. While in China, Afghan Acting Minister of Commerce Haji Nooruddin Azizi said that his government would be sending a technical team back to China, to confer on follow-up participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As reported in his interview with Reuters, a day after the BRF ended, Azizi said, “We requested China to allow us to be a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Belt and Road Initiative.”

Earlier this year, China had formally welcomed this prospect. The Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement April 12, titled “China’s Position on the Afghan Issue,” stating:

China welcomes Afghanistan’s participation in Belt and Road cooperation, and supports Afghanistan’s regional economic cooperation and connectivity that will transform Afghanistan from a ‘land-locked country’ to a ‘land-linked’ country.

Afghanistan had already formally joined the Belt and Road Initiative in the early years of its founding in 2013, and in 2017 sent a top level Afghan delegation to the second BRI Forum. But with the occupation by the U.S./NATO forces, and the strife and instability in Afghanistan at the time, no BRI projects were initiated. Meanwhile what infrastructure existed from earlier decades—bridges, waterworks, hydro-power, highways, and more—came into disrepair, even destruction. And there is a very long backlog of priority new, unbuilt projects—many of them designed years ago, but shelved.

Now the way is open. China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke of China’s commitment to continue to help Afghanistan to integrate with regional economic

cooperation with Central and South Asia neighbors, when he met Oct. 5, before the third BRF, with IEA Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Mutaqqi, at the Himalayan Rim International Cooperation Forum in Tibet.

The need for infrastructure and related projects in Afghanistan is acute—power, water, transportation, and healthcare. For example, electricity consumption per capita in Afghanistan is barely 145 kWh a year, in contrast with Iran, for example, with 3,500 kWh. There is a total railroad length of only 300 km in all of Afghanistan, a nation in the size range of Kenya or



Afghanistan Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock

The long-delayed irrigation system associated with the hydro-electric Kamal Khan Dam (completed in 2021) on the lower Helmand River will provide water to 50,000 hectares for wheat and other crops. The southwest was formerly home to opium poppy cultivation.

Ukraine, but larger. Safe water and sanitation levels are low. Add to this the crisis-conditions imposed and maintained through Western sanctions, and through the confiscation of Afghan central banking assets by the U.S. and European cohorts. The result is widespread suffering among the 40 million Afghans, and a diaspora of more than eight million. Over 80% of the population is involved in agriculture, but a large share of them are producing just enough for their individual households to survive. Afghanistan has not been food self-sufficient since the 1970s, before all the armed conflict.

Making a Miracle

In these circumstances, what the Kabul government has been able to do in the last two years, amounts to a “making a miracle” by proceeding with selected economic initiatives, which, if priority projects are now pushed forward with BRI-associated collaboration and resources, can result in an actual miracle of economic advancement. Kabul at present is simultaneously trying to take care of the emergency situation of its population, including from earthquakes and other disasters, but at the same time, the government is initiating strategic projects which can upgrade the future level of the entire economic platform. It can be said that under terribly aversive conditions, Afghanistan is creating a new development model, using lessons from other times and places, but forging a unique pathway.

Two transformative achievements of this type:

- The initiation of building the Qush Tepa Canal for irrigation, in the Amu Darya River Basin in the fertile northern region. When completed, the new water conveyance will enable Afghanistan to be food self-sufficient again. The 285 km canal and irrigation system are designed to serve 550,000 hectares, which can close the wheat supply gap. The intended completion year is 2027.

- The near elimination of the cultivation of opium poppy, over the 2022–2023 crop season was a significant contributing factor in the increase of the 2023 Afghanistan wheat harvest over recent years’ volumes. In the former poppy cultivation center in the lower Helmand River Basin, Kabul is now working to build out the irrigation system associated with the newly completed (2021) Kamal Khan Dam, which will provide water for 50,000 hectares of wheat and other crops.

A flagship project, ready to go, but awaiting financing, is the Trans-Afghan Railway, to be built from the Uzbekistan rail terminus Termez, diagonally across Afghanistan some 760 km, to connect into Pakistan and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Northward, the line will connect through Uzbekistan into Kyrgyzstan, where China has committed to help build a cross-Kyrgyzstan rail line, to allow passengers and freight to flow back and forth between Afghanistan and China, without the current intermodal truck stretch in Kyrgyzstan.

There are also construction works underway for hospitals, schools, mosques, highway repair, and similar basics; and for hydrocarbon and mineral works. Even prior to the initiation of the BRI in 2013, Chinese firms were operating in Afghanistan. For example, the Metallurgical Corp. of China Ltd (MCC) has



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When completed, the Qush Tepa Canal will divert water from the Amu Darya River, transforming 550,000 hectares of desert into farmland.

been involved in plans for the huge copper deposits at the historic Mes Aynak site, and is again in talks with the Taliban government. Afghanistan is using selective sales of mineral and fossil fuel mining rights to fund its priority infrastructure projects.

Most of the building activity is done by the National Development Corporation (NDC), the government firm, with various sub-units in engineering and heavy construction. In its August 2023 annual report, the NDC spokesman said that the NDC has 1,131 active projects nationwide, of which more than 400 had been completed as of that time. Of those, 89 were “development” projects, and others varied, from hospitals to sports fields.

Schiller Institute’s Operation Ibn Sina

The spirit of this commitment to development, even in the face of severe conditions for the population now, is akin to Operation Ibn Sina, which Schiller Institute leader Helga Zepp-LaRouche announced just two years ago, in October 2021. Ibn Sina (980–1037) was the great physician and universal philosopher, whose father was born in the north of present-day Afghanistan, and his son was born nearby. Zepp-LaRouche stressed at the time, given the COVID-19 pandemic, the priority of building a health care system, which presupposes uplifting the whole economy. She said, announcing her [initiative](#) Oct. 19, 2021 on PTV in Islamabad, Pakistan:

I suggest that the international community, everybody who wants to be part of the solution, helps to build up a modern health system in Afghanistan, as the first step the stabilize the situation, and give that the name ‘Operation Ibn Sina.’