

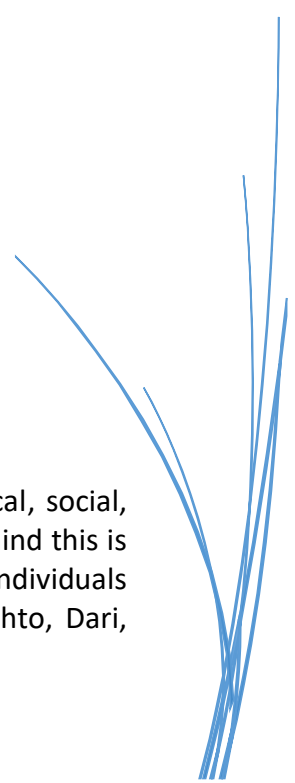
WEEKLY ANALYSIS

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THE GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AFGHAN-TRANS PROJECT: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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THE GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AFGHAN-TRANS PROJECT: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Introduction

On July 16, 2025, a significant agreement was signed in Kabul, marking the start of a feasibility study for the “Afghan-Trans” railway project. Senior officials from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan, including Amir Khan Muttaqi (Afghanistan’s Acting Foreign Minister), Ishaq Dar (Pakistan’s Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister), and Bakhtiyor Saidov (Uzbekistan’s Foreign Minister), attended the signing ceremony at the Presidential Palace of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The agreement was officially signed between Afghanistan’s Ministry of Public Works, Uzbekistan’s Ministry of Transport, and Pakistan Railways.

This railway project, considered one of the largest regional infrastructure initiatives, aims to connect Central Asia with South Asia through Afghanistan. It is expected to play a crucial role in strengthening regional connectivity and promoting cross-border trade.

The Afghan-Trans railway is a major geopolitical initiative designed to link the Central Asian states with South Asia. Work on this project began during the current government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The planned railway will span approximately 774 kilometers, starting from Termez in Uzbekistan and passing through Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Maidan Wardak, Logar, and Paktia, before reaching Kharlachi border port and finally Peshawar in Pakistan.

The feasibility agreement signed in Kabul marks the official beginning of trilateral cooperation on this strategic route. According to reports, the estimated cost of the project ranges between \$4.8 and \$7 billion, and it is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2027. Once operational, the railway will have the capacity to transport up to 5 million tons of goods annually. It will reduce the cargo transit time from 35 days to just 5 days and cut transportation costs by up to 40%. The project will include freight stations, customs terminals, logistics centers, and digital freight management systems.

In this article, we will provide a brief overview of the Afghan-Trans project's background and examine its geopolitical significance, as well as the key opportunities and challenges associated with its implementation.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AFGHAN-TRANS PROJECT

The Afghan-Trans railway project is rooted in Afghanistan’s long-standing efforts to become part of regional transportation networks. While the idea of developing railway lines in Afghanistan dates back to the reign of King Amanullah Khan in the early 20th century, no major regional rail project had ever reached implementation until recently.



In December 2018, Uzbekistan became the first country to formally propose building a railway that would link Afghanistan to Pakistan via Mazar-i-Sharif. Over the following years, this idea gained momentum with the support of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and cooperation from both Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Eventually, a formal agreement on conducting a feasibility study was signed in Kabul, in the presence of the foreign ministers of all three countries.

Initially, two possible routes through Afghanistan were considered for the railway. The first route ran through Logar Province to Torkham, while the second route extended from Logar through Paktia Province into Pakistan. After technical, environmental, and security assessments, the second route was selected. It was found to be 126 kilometers shorter, with flatter terrain, better security conditions, and lower overall costs.

The railway is planned to start from Termez in Uzbekistan, pass through northern and central Afghanistan, and end in Peshawar, Pakistan. The Afghan portion of the route will cover approximately 681 kilometers and will be built to a 1520 mm gauge standard, matching Uzbekistan's rail system.

During trilateral meetings between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan, the countries also agreed on a one-year plan to carry out in-depth feasibility studies and attract international investment for the project.

THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE AFGHAN-TRANS PROJECT

The Afghan-Trans railway project represents a strategic geopolitical turning point for Afghanistan and the broader region. Situated at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, Afghanistan's unique geographic location has long positioned it as a natural bridge between these regions. The Afghan-Trans initiative, aimed at linking Uzbekistan by rail through Afghanistan to Pakistan and the ports of Gwadar and Karachi, seeks to transform Afghanistan from a landlocked country into a regional economic hub.

By creating a vital economic corridor, this project not only facilitates Central Asian countries' access to warm-water ports but also fosters broader commercial and economic interactions among regional players. It has the potential to solidify Afghanistan's role as a crucial link in regional connectivity.

The geopolitical significance of this project lies in its potential to reshape the regional transit map. Once completed, it will enable Afghanistan to overcome geographic isolation and open new trade routes between Central and South Asia. This diversification will reduce dependency on limited existing corridors and enhance Afghanistan's bargaining power in both political and economic negotiations. At the same time, it will lessen Central Asian states' reliance on transit routes through Iran and Russia. These shifts would place Afghanistan at the center of regional



trade and energy exchange, elevating its strategic relevance in regional affairs. Furthermore, the project could pave the way for Afghanistan to play a more active role in global supply chains, fostering long-term sustainable economic growth.

From a security perspective, the Afghan-Trans project also holds the potential to enhance regional cohesion by fostering economic interdependence among key stakeholders—namely Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan. Such interdependence would generate shared incentives to safeguard the railway corridor and promote cooperation in intelligence and regional security. This could help reduce political tensions, strengthen peace efforts, and promote lasting stability in Afghanistan and the wider region.

Moreover, the project provides an opportunity to compete with parallel regional initiatives, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Iran's Chabahar Port development. If managed wisely, this competition could attract increased investment and regional attention, strengthening Afghanistan's position as a key transit country and improving its international standing.

At a broader level, the Afghan-Trans project is one of the most significant geopolitical initiatives in the region, with the capacity to transform the regional order. The railway would provide a shorter, cheaper, and more secure transport route for goods between Central and South Asia, reinforcing Afghanistan's role in regional transit networks. Through this route, Uzbekistan would gain direct access to Pakistan's southern ports and the Indian Ocean, reducing its dependency on transit corridors through Iran and Turkmenistan. To support the project, Uzbekistan is already engaging in negotiations with Russia, China, and Gulf states to attract investment and political backing.

Simultaneously, Pakistan stands to benefit by expanding its economic influence and securing a stronger strategic position in regional competition—particularly with rival India. Ultimately, the Afghan-Trans project has the potential to contribute to the emergence of a new Eurasian order, in which Afghanistan evolves from a zone of crisis and isolation into a vital economic connector. This transformation could lead to accelerated economic growth, reduced poverty, increased employment, and reinforced regional stability.

CHALLENGES FACING THE AFGHAN-TRANS PROJECT

Despite its significant benefits, the Afghan-Trans railway project faces several serious challenges that could hinder its successful implementation. These challenges fall into four main categories: political, economic, technical, and geopolitical.

1. Political Challenges



One of the major obstacles to the Afghan-Trans project is political instability in the participating countries, particularly Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although security in Afghanistan has improved under the Islamic Emirate, concerns remain over the lack of an inclusive government, limited international engagement, and the fact that most countries—including some directly involved in this project—do not officially recognize the current Afghan government. These issues make it difficult to secure international cooperation and political support, which are critical for moving the project forward.

In Pakistan, internal political instability, ongoing violence by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and unrest in regions like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa pose additional security and political risks. Moreover, longstanding border disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan and wider geopolitical rivalries involving Iran, Turkmenistan, India, China, and Western powers add further complexity. These tensions could disrupt multilateral cooperation and delay project implementation.

2. Economic and Financial Challenges

Funding the Afghan-Trans project is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks. With an estimated cost between \$4.8 and \$7 billion, securing the necessary capital in the current environment is extremely challenging. Afghanistan faces economic sanctions, limited access to global banking systems, food insecurity, and a lack of investor protections—all of which have shaken international confidence. In Pakistan, high inflation, currency depreciation, and a growing debt crisis make domestic investment difficult. Although Uzbekistan is in a more stable position, it still depends on support from third-party countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and China. The lack of a joint financial mechanism among the three countries also complicates project management. Furthermore, competing transport routes like the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, the Chabahar Port initiative, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) may divert potential investors away from Afghan-Trans.

3. Technical and Infrastructure Challenges

Afghanistan suffers from major technical and infrastructure limitations. The lack of modern transport systems, dangerous mountainous terrain, and a shortage of advanced construction equipment will make the project both time-consuming and expensive. Additionally, there is a shortage of skilled engineers, project managers, and railway technicians, which could affect the quality and durability of the railway. Technical differences between the countries—such as rail gauge width, signaling systems, and construction standards—will require significant coordination and investment. While Pakistan has more experience in railway development, it still struggles with poor infrastructure maintenance and coordination across provinces.



Uzbekistan, for its part, will need to undertake complex engineering designs to ensure its segment of the railway connects smoothly with Afghanistan and Pakistan.

4. Geopolitical Challenges

The Afghan-Trans project also carries significant geopolitical weight. Uzbekistan views it as a way to reduce its dependence on Russian transit routes and strengthen its position as a regional transport hub. Pakistan sees the project as a means to expand its influence in regional trade and access Central Asian markets. Meanwhile, neighboring countries like Iran and Turkmenistan may see the project as a threat to their own transit routes and will likely promote alternative pathways to limit Afghanistan's strategic role.

Without legally binding multilateral agreements and stronger political commitments from all involved countries, the project may face setbacks due to regional rivalries, strategic hesitation, and a lack of coordination. The absence of long-term shared policies could lead to delays and reduce the chances of successful implementation.

In summary, while the Afghan-Trans project holds tremendous promise for regional connectivity and economic growth, it must overcome substantial political, financial, technical, and geopolitical hurdles. Managing these challenges will require strong international cooperation, effective governance, and long-term strategic vision.

OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY THE AFGHAN-TRANS PROJECT

The Afghan-Trans railway project offers a wide range of opportunities that could significantly benefit Afghanistan and the broader region. These opportunities span across the areas of security, politics, economics, infrastructure, and regional cooperation.

1. Security Opportunities

In the past—particularly during the previous republic government—security threats were among the main barriers to implementing the Afghan-Trans project. Armed conflict, instability, and insecurity discouraged movement, investment, and regional cooperation. However, Afghanistan now enjoys a relatively stable security environment across much of the country. This improved security creates a favorable foundation for regional connectivity and better use of Afghanistan's strategic location at the heart of Asia.

2. Political Opportunities

The Afghan-Trans project has the potential to transform Afghanistan from an isolated, landlocked nation into a vital transit corridor between Central and South Asia. The current government, the Islamic Emirate, views this project as a chance to strengthen its legitimacy,



build constructive relations with neighboring countries, and overcome diplomatic isolation. Trilateral cooperation between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan can also help build trust, reduce political tensions, and strengthen regional diplomacy. This project is part of a broader vision to create a new regional economic and political framework—less dependent on Western influence—by enhancing direct connections between Central and South Asia.

3. Economic Opportunities

By linking Afghanistan with Uzbekistan and Pakistan through rail, the Afghan-Trans project can dramatically reduce both the time and cost of transporting goods. Transport time could be cut from 35 days to just 3–5 days, and costs may drop by up to threefold. This makes the route highly competitive with existing alternatives and could boost regional trade. Afghanistan stands to benefit from substantial transit revenue, with projections estimating annual transit volumes could reach over 22 million tons by 2030. The project will also generate thousands of direct and indirect jobs in construction, transportation, logistics, and project management. Furthermore, it will support the development of rail stations, cargo handling facilities, and transport infrastructure within Afghanistan. It will also enhance exports of Afghan minerals, agricultural goods, and industrial products, reducing the country's dependence on foreign aid.

4. Infrastructure and Technical Opportunities

The Afghan-Trans project could also serve as a platform for transferring technical knowledge and building Afghanistan's technological capacity. Working alongside experienced countries such as Uzbekistan, Russia, and the UAE will help develop local expertise in railway design, construction, and operations. The use of the 1520 mm rail gauge—standard in much of the region—will allow Afghanistan to connect more easily to international railway networks and strengthen its position within the broader Eurasian rail system.

5. Regional Integration Opportunities

The signing of the trilateral agreement between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan to conduct a feasibility study for Afghan-Trans marks an important step toward long-term regional cooperation and economic integration. Additionally, countries like Qatar, the UAE, China, and Russia have shown interest in investing in the project. This growing interest from third-party nations can further stimulate infrastructure development, economic growth, and stronger diplomatic ties among the three core countries. Over time, the successful implementation of the Afghan-Trans project could help reduce poverty, boost trade, improve living standards, and promote sustainable development across the region—positioning Afghanistan as a key player in the emerging regional economic order.

CONCLUSION



The Afghan-Trans railway project is more than just a transportation initiative—it is a multi-layered geopolitical effort with the potential to reshape the economic, political, and security dynamics of the region. Stretching across approximately 681 kilometers of Afghan territory, the railway aims to link Central Asia with Pakistan’s warm-water ports, enabling the transport of up to 5 million tons of cargo annually. It will cut delivery time from 35 days to just 5 and reduce transportation costs by up to 40%. By signing the feasibility study agreement in Kabul, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have taken the first step toward meaningful regional cooperation. Extra-regional powers such as Russia, China, Qatar, and the UAE have also shown strong interest in contributing financially and technically to the project.

From a geopolitical perspective, the project could transform Afghanistan from an isolated, landlocked country into a strategic connector linking Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and even China. Competition from other regional corridors—such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Iran’s Chabahar Port, and the North-South Transit Corridor—highlights Afghanistan’s growing importance in regional trade and logistics. However, the project still faces major hurdles, including security risks, weak infrastructure, differences in railway standards, geopolitical rivalries, and institutional challenges like poor management and lack of transparency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Establish a Joint Management Body:** Create a trilateral authority involving Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan to oversee technical, financial, and operational aspects of the Afghan-Trans project, with support from international institutions such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.
2. **Develop Clear Legal Frameworks:** To avoid future disputes, comprehensive legal agreements and contractual frameworks should be established between all participating countries.
3. **Attract Foreign Investment:** Offer consistent investment incentives, legal and tax guarantees, and ensure transparency in contract processes to build investor confidence.
4. **Ensure Security of the Route:** Strengthen security through joint intelligence sharing, establish coordinated security units, and involve local communities in protecting project infrastructure.
5. **Build Local Capacity:** Invest in training skilled professionals, creating technical training centers, and improving project management expertise to support the long-term sustainability of the project.



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