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ALTERNATIVE TRADE ROUTES FOR AFGHANISTAN BEYOND PAKISTAN: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS



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ALTERNATIVE TRADE ROUTES FOR AFGHANISTAN BEYOND PAKISTAN: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Introduction

Afghanistan's strategic location gives it a strong potential to serve as a bridge between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, connecting major regional trade and transit corridors. Although the country does not have direct access to the seas, it still holds significant strategic value for regional transit. Afghanistan's economy relies heavily on imports and exports, and for many years, utilizing Pakistan's territory for transit has been the most cost-effective and convenient option. However, Pakistan has repeatedly used this trade route as a tool of political pressure against Afghanistan. Whenever political tensions rise between the two countries, Pakistan closes its trade routes, creating widespread problems for Afghan traders, farmers, and the national economy as a whole.

During the latest tensions between Pakistan and the Islamic Emirate, Pakistan once again shut down transit routes. This situation highlights the need for Afghanistan to urgently identify alternative trade corridors and ensure that its regional and international trade is not dependent on a single country. In response, the Islamic Emirate has tried to accelerate efforts to develop new transit routes, air corridors, and railway projects.

In recent months, strengthened relations between the Islamic Emirate and India, as well as between the Islamic Emirate and Iran—which has increased the strategic importance of the Chabahar Port—along with the opening of new trade routes through Central Asia, have created fresh economic and commercial opportunities for Afghanistan. Based on this context, the following questions guide this analysis:

What alternative trade routes can Afghanistan use in response to Pakistan's restrictions? What challenges might Afghanistan face when using these routes?

This study first introduces the main alternative trade corridors for Afghanistan, highlights the opportunities they create, and examines the challenges involved. In the end, it provides a conclusion along with practical recommendations to help readers gain a comprehensive understanding of the importance, benefits, and limitations of Afghanistan's alternative trade routes.

ALTERNATIVE TRADE ROUTES FOR AFGHANISTAN BEYOND PAKISTAN

Afghanistan shares borders not only with Pakistan but also with Iran, three Central Asian countries (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan), and China. For this reason, Afghanistan can connect with regional and global markets through the territories of its neighboring states. The key alternative trade routes include the following:



1. Chabahar Port: Chabahar Port is located in southeastern Iran in the province of Sistan and Baluchestan, with direct access to the Indian Ocean. Its geographic position provides Afghanistan with an important opportunity to trade with the Middle East, the Gulf states, and India. Through this port, Afghan goods can reach global markets without needing to transit through Pakistan, and Afghanistan can also import goods from other countries.

After 2014, India and Afghanistan jointly decided to make strategic use of Chabahar Port in cooperation with Iran. India's interest comes from its competition with Pakistan in the region. Since India cannot access Afghan and Central Asian markets through Pakistani territory—and given that Pakistan frequently uses transit closures as political leverage against Afghanistan—both India and Afghanistan have sought alternative trade corridors through Chabahar.

Chabahar Port holds exceptional strategic value for India. It serves as India's gateway to Afghanistan, and beyond Afghanistan, it opens routes toward Central Asia and even eastern Russia. Through the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), India can send its commercial goods to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Russia without passing through Pakistan. For Afghanistan, Chabahar is the only reliable route that provides access to open waters while reducing dependence on Pakistan. It also enables Afghanistan to build stronger commercial ties with Russia and Central Asian states.

Furthermore, Russia—a major regional and global power that has recognized the Islamic Emirate—seeks to advance its strategic objectives in the region in competition with the United States. One of Russia's key goals is to transform Eurasia into a unified continental space characterized by stability, mutual trust, development, and prosperity. To achieve this, Russia is strengthening the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) by enhancing regional security, supporting sustainable development, and adapting the organization's activities to current geopolitical realities. At the same time, Russia is promoting broader Eurasian economic integration.

Afghanistan's geographical position—between Russia and the broader Eurasian region and sharing borders with Central Asia, Iran, China, and Pakistan—gives it strategic importance for regional transportation and energy transit. Russia can use Afghanistan as a transit hub to link Central Asian countries, Afghanistan, Iran, and India through Chabahar Port, allowing Russian energy exports to reach India via this route. Afghanistan also represents an important commercial market for Russia, which currently exports more than USD 300 million worth of goods—such as oil, gas, wheat, and various commodities—to Afghanistan annually.

2. The Central Asia Route: Afghanistan can also rely on its shared borders with Central Asian states to support trade and create viable alternatives to Pakistan. Beyond bilateral trade, Afghanistan can use Central Asian territory to access China, Russia, and European markets.



Trade between Afghanistan and Central Asia currently reaches USD 1.7 billion, with Uzbekistan ranking first at USD 1.1 billion. Uzbekistan has expressed interest in increasing trade volume with Afghanistan to USD 2 billion.

China, seeking to expand its economic influence and strengthen regional cooperation, has launched an initiative to transport goods to Afghanistan via railway lines. This initiative facilitates direct shipment of Chinese commercial goods through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Mazar-e-Sharif. The first shipment under this corridor entered Afghanistan on November 23 of this year. This development creates significant opportunities for boosting regional economic integration and establishing a reliable alternative trade pathway.

For Afghanistan, the railway initiative is particularly valuable because of its strategic location between Central and South Asia. Enhanced rail connectivity reduces transportation time, lowers costs, and increases the security of commercial goods. It also enables Afghanistan to export its own products more efficiently and access new markets. Beyond economic benefits, this project strengthens political ties and regional cooperation.

3. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor: Another major alternative trade route is the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, historically part of the ancient Silk Road. In earlier times, this route was used to export gemstones, including Badakhshan's famous lapis lazuli, to Europe, the Balkans, and Mediterranean coastal states.

Today, the corridor starts from Afghanistan's ports of Aqina and Torghundi and connects to Turkmenistan's Turkmenbashi Port. From there, Afghan goods cross the Caspian Sea to the Port of Baku in Azerbaijan, then travel through the Black Sea to the Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi, and onward to European and Balkan countries.

Historically, Afghanistan traded a variety of goods with countries located along this route, particularly Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has stated his country's readiness to cooperate with Afghanistan in infrastructure development, transportation links, and railway construction—efforts aimed at reviving the Silk Road. This would enable the broader Asian region to connect with Europe through Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.

Air Corridors: For landlocked countries with no direct access to the sea, air corridors represent one of the most effective methods for conducting trade and integrating into global markets. This initiative has transformed traditional perspectives on commerce and has become an important mechanism in the global economy. Today, approximately 31 countries around the world are landlocked, including 15 in Africa, 12 in Asia, two in Latin America, and two in Central and Eastern Europe. Although the overall trade volume of these countries is roughly 60 percent



lower than that of states with access to the sea, they are compelled to spend nearly 50 percent more on transporting their goods.

In such contexts, air corridors offer significant opportunities for economic growth and reduce dependence on neighboring transit states. With these considerations in mind, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has instructed the state-owned airline Ariana to lower export freight charges to one U.S. dollar per kilogram and import freight charges to 80 cents per kilogram.

Although the establishment of air corridors can address Afghanistan's economic and commercial needs in the short term, this method cannot serve as a fully sustainable long-term solution. It is unrealistic to expect all Afghan exports to be transported through air corridors. While this system may facilitate the export of certain fresh and dried fruits, it cannot support the shipment of heavy or large-volume goods.

CHALLENGES TO USING AFGHANISTAN'S ALTERNATIVE TRANSIT ROUTES

Although Afghanistan has several transit options beyond Pakistan, using these alternative corridors is neither simple nor inexpensive. The main obstacles affecting these routes—and potential solutions—are outlined below:

1. The Port of Chabahar: Chabahar Port is also subject to U.S. sanctions. When Donald Trump first took office and reinstated sanctions on Iran in 2018, the development of Chabahar faced significant delays. Recently, on 30 October 2025, India's Ministry of External Affairs confirmed that the United States has granted India a six-month exemption to continue its operations at the port.

Had this exemption not been renewed, Afghanistan, already heavily dependent on Pakistan for transit, would have faced severe limitations and would not have been able to rely on Chabahar either. It is important to note that the exemption is a temporary measure, allowing both India and Afghanistan only short-term access to the port.

Under these conditions, both India and Afghanistan must work jointly to persuade the United States to grant a permanent exemption. Achieving this, however, is complicated by the geopolitical dynamics:

- India maintains strong economic and strategic ties with Iran and Russia,
- while also maintaining important defense and trade relations with the United States.

If India's engagement with Iran and Russia deepens further, the United States may respond by reinstating full sanctions on Chabahar.



Additionally, fluctuations in U.S.–Taliban relations will influence the sustainability of Chabahar’s operations for Afghanistan. Should bilateral relations improve, the United States could use the exemption as a bargaining tool, seeking concessions from the Taliban administration in exchange for continued access.

2. India’s Potential Use of Chabahar as Leverage: Another concern is the possibility that India, like Pakistan, could eventually use the Chabahar route as a political pressure tool against Afghanistan—especially in scenarios where tensions between the Taliban administration and Pakistan decrease. This potential risk underscores the need for the Islamic Emirate to recognize these geopolitical sensitivities and diversify its partnerships.

3. Technical and Logistical Challenges in the Northern Corridor

Afghanistan’s northern transit routes—connecting the country to Central Asia. still face major technical and logistical difficulties and remain insufficiently modernized. Roads are not built to international standards, making transportation slow, unreliable, and expensive. In some cases, moving goods through this corridor can take up to 60 days, compared with only four days via Pakistan.

To make this route competitive and fully functional, the following steps are essential:

- i. Reconstruct northern roads according to international standards,
- ii. Reduce logistical expenses and customs tariffs,
- iii. Accelerate the construction and expansion of railway links.

CONCLUSION

Although Afghanistan’s trade has long been dependent on Pakistan’s transit routes, the country is not without alternatives. With support from neighboring and regional states that maintain close relations with the Islamic Emirate, Afghanistan can increasingly meet its economic and commercial needs through other channels. Among these options, the Chabahar Port and the northern transit routes through Central Asia stand out as particularly significant. These corridors become more effective when coordination and cooperation between Afghanistan and the countries along these routes are strengthened.

Such coordination is attainable when the Islamic Emirate addresses the concerns of these partner states during bilateral and multilateral engagements. The Islamic Emirate has already achieved some success in this regard—for instance, in its improving relations with India. Building on this progress, Afghanistan can use Chabahar as a viable alternative to Pakistan,



and—through cooperation with Russia, Central Asian states, Iran, and India, mitigate the disruption caused by Pakistan’s periodic closure of transit routes.

While seeking alternative transit corridors is a constructive and necessary step, it is important to recognize that expanding commercial ties with countries other than Pakistan, particularly those that provide Afghanistan access to maritime routes and global markets, comes with its own sensitivities. For example, Afghanistan’s closer alignment with India in the context of Indo-Pakistani rivalry may provoke heightened sensitivities in Pakistan. Moreover, countries facilitating Afghanistan’s transit access do not engage in these arrangements solely for Afghanistan’s benefit. Just as access to the sea can serve both commercial and geopolitical purposes, these states may also, in the future, employ their transit routes as instruments of political or diplomatic leverage, much like Pakistan has done in the past.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Although the Islamic Emirate is currently seeking alternative trade routes in the short term, it should strive to find a permanent solution to the fundamental problems between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan is a neighboring country, and even if trade routes shift, its geography cannot be altered.
2. Greater attention should be given to the Chabahar Port, and Afghanistan should expand opportunities for coordination with India, Iran, Russia, and Central Asian countries in this area.
3. Regional countries should be encouraged to provide technical and logistical assistance in facilitating transit processes and modernizing Afghanistan’s transit infrastructure.
4. Regarding air corridors, the Islamic Emirate should enhance the technical capacity of Kabul International Airport so that commercial goods can be thoroughly scanned and exported to other countries with confidence.

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