

AFGHANISTAN AS A PART OF CENTRAL ASIA. THE CASE FOR REINTEGRATION

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Introduction

When considering the renowned Silk Road of the Middle Ages that passed through Central Asia, Afghanistan was an integral part of this "road." However, in recent decades, due to politics and security concerns, Afghanistan has generally been seen as separate from Central Asia. Official U.S. policy for the next five years - the U.S. National Security Strategy for Central Asia - urges the five Central Asian nations to work toward including Afghanistan back into the fold. This would not only facilitate Afghanistan's development but also improve regional connectivity and mitigate security concerns coming from Afghanistan. This plan seems logical, but in practice, it would be difficult to implement this reunification.

Before the polities that would make the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were a part of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan was a natural part of Central Asia. However, Soviet rule over these five countries' as Soviet Socialist Republics created cultural and political barriers that made it difficult for Afghanistan to be included among this grouping of Central Asian states. The Russian language became as a lingua franca, facilitating communication and cooperation among the five countries, but this further isolated Afghanistan. Additionally, Soviet infrastructure and influence led to a different direction of development for the nations than what Afghanistan experienced for much of the 20th century. Even so, Afghanistan and the Central Asian Soviet Republics were still linked by common historical and ethnic bonds. Just like most of the Central Asian countries, Afghanistan is a multiethnic state, home to considerable populations of ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmens.[1]

U.S. Involvement

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the independence of its Central Asian republics, the United States became increasingly invested in Central Asian affairs, both economically and politically. It has repeatedly stressed its support for these countries' sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. During that same period, however, Afghanistan experienced a very different history dominated by the Taliban's effort to become the supreme political power in that country. Recently, U.S. - Afghanistan relations have taken a different turn when the White House made a historic deal with both the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. To facilitate increased development, peace, and regional connectivity, recent official U.S. policy urges the Central Asian countries to look at Afghanistan as a Central Asian nation too. In the past, the United States treated Central Asia and Afghanistan as two distinct entities.[2] Now, U.S. officials aim to integrate Afghanistan into the fold.

In a February 5, 2020, roundtable discussion at the Heritage Foundation that followed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Central Asia, then-Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Alice Wells stated, "The big change is that Afghanistan is a Central Asian state, and we need to make our policies reflect that fact and to help the region achieve that level of inter-connectivity which they need as landlocked nations."[3] Landlocked countries typically experience more barriers to general socio-economic development, and this is why it is important for land-locked states to have a network of neighbors to help.[4] It clearly is in the interest of the United States to redefine Afghanistan as a Central Asian country because of issues common to the entire region. Extremist threats from the Islamic State and other groups, as well as growing Chinese influence and Russia's desire to maintain its historic role in the region, make it all the more imperative for these six nations to work closely together.



President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani receives U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Kabul, Afghanistan on March 23, 2020. Source: Afghan Presidency Press Office | Anadolu Agency | Getty Images

Regional Cooperation

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has provided significant aid to the region, which should encourage the process of integration. President of China Xi Jinping announced what has come to be called the BRI in Kazakhstan's capital in September 2013. Since then, he has explained that "China will actively promote international cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative. In doing so, we hope to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity and thus build a new platform for international cooperation to create new drivers of shared development."[5] Trade blocs are integral to the BRI because they facilitate trade, productivity, and cooperation among the countries in a specific bloc. Afghanistan belongs to the trade bloc titled "The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO)," and this is important because the five Central Asian countries are in this trade bloc along with Iran and Turkey. China hopes that its BRI will boost Afghanistan's economy and infrastructure in ways that will allow it to collaborate further with Central Asia. Most of the individual states of Central Asia have shown interest and initiative to cooperate with and to include Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan shares a border with Afghanistan and, over the years, has maintained a discreet relationship with the Taliban. It has also provided electricity to northwestern Afghanistan. The President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, announced in February 2020 his plans to engage in an even more cooperative relationship with Afghanistan: "Turkmenistan stands for resolving the situation in Afghanistan by exclusively peaceful political and diplomatic means, proposing concrete steps aimed at restoring its economy and social infrastructure."[6] The President's words are a hopeful indicator of a more productive relationship between the two countries in the future. Identifying tangible steps to move forward and increase the economic connectivity between these neighboring states would be a boon to regional security.

Kazakhstan has been a leader in fostering regional inclusion of Afghanistan. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has appointed a special representative for Afghanistan to increase diplomacy between the two nations.[7] Kazakhstan has also been active in providing aid to Afghanistan. This aid has come in many different forms, including scholarships for Afghan women to study in Kazakhstan.[8] The government of Kazakhstan has further expressed its wishes to increase trade and economic ties with Afghanistan. Notably, Askar Aryanov, the Head of Kazakhstan's Investment Department, has said: "As a result of efforts made by [our] two countries to expand trade relations, we will provide Afghanistan with more facilities. Even Afghanistan can be connected to the trilateral railway of Astana, Ashgabat, and Iran."[9] These updated facilities and inclusion in the regional railway system would be beneficial in developing Afghanistan's economy and improving its transit sector which would increase regional connectivity.[10]



The meeting of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, on December 5, 2017. Source: Official website of the President of Uzbekistan.

Afghanistan has also increased its trade in the region. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor has allowed Afghanistan to export products like cotton, dried fruit, and sesame products to and through Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and Turkmenistan.[11] This has boosted Afghanistan's economy and demonstrated that it can benefit the countries in the Greater Caspian Region. More broadly, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor promotes interregional highway, railroad, and maritime connectivity throughout the region.[12]

Uzbekistan has been active in promoting strong diplomatic relations with Afghanistan and also promoted peace within Afghanistan between the Taliban and the Afghan government. In late March 2018, Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev met with President Ashraf Ghani in Tashkent to affirm support for the Afghan government and a future peace plan with the Taliban.[13] This meeting culminated in a declaration of commitment to foster cooperation between the two sides. Mirziyoyev explained his reasoning for getting involved: "Afghanistan's security is Uzbekistan's security."[14] Indeed, a more secure Afghanistan has wider implications for security throughout the region. Focusing on stabilizing Afghanistan's security will not only help Afghanistan, but it will also help secure the border regions it shares with

the Central Asian states. Uzbekistan has also helped Afghanistan advance in other areas as well. In 2017, Uzbekistan agreed to help with legal cases, customs, and air-traffic control.[15] These cooperation projects emphasize that reintegrating Afghanistan into the Central Asian fold can benefit the entire region.

Challenges to Reintergration

One roadblock to fostering harmony amongst Central Asian countries and Afghanistan is security issues on the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border. The border along the Panj River, has notoriously experienced drug trafficking and terror-related infiltrations.[16] Part of the security issues for this border is due to the Taliban's control over much of this region. Taliban forces have even kidnapped Tajik border guards.[17] To this end, the Afghan government must realize the importance of negotiation with the Taliban. However, while Tajikistan has reason to be wary, cooperation between governments would do more to improve security. In fact, both Tajikistan and Afghanistan have shown their potential to work together through CASA-1000, a project meant to provide hydro-power energy from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan and Pakistan.[18] This project is an example of how closer ties between Afghanistan and Central Asian nations are mutually beneficial: Tajikistan gains economic profit and Afghanistan receives a reliable power supply.

A significant challenge that must be overcome to ensure Afghanistan's inclusion is the need for a clearer organization of power in Afghanistan. Currently, there is still confusion and a power split between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Adding to the confusion, following recent elections in Afghanistan, there was contention over who really won the presidency. While Ghani received the majority vote, Abdullah Abdullah organized a separate ceremony where he was sworn in as President. However, an agreement was finally reached, which rendered Ghani President and Abdullah head of the Afghan peace process. Continuing negotiations between the United States and both the Afghan government and the Taliban has the potential to ease the process of negotiations between Afghanistan and Central Asian countries. However, without a resolution in place between Ghani and Abdullah, the U.S. government had announced it was cutting aid to Afghanistan by $1 billion.[19] Once a power-sharing agreement was adopted by President Ghani and Abdullah, the peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban began to gain traction.[20]



Then-Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbai Jeenbekov, President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, Prime Minister of Pakistan Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, and Executive Chairman of Afghanistan Abdullah Abdullah at the Opening Ceremony of the CASA-1000 Project Implementation Phase on May 12, 2016 in the town of Tursunzade near Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Source: The State Enterprise of "Jahonnamo."

Recommendations

Reintegrating Afghanistan into Central Asia cannot be accomplished by simple political declarations; it will be a gradual process accomplished over time as both aid and trade bring the countries closer together. As Central Asia continues to explore forming a regional bloc of nations on the model of the Association of South East Asian Nations or the Nordic Council, it should consider involving Afghanistan in this long-term effort. Such integration is a slow process. For example, what is now the European Union took decades to accomplish. It began with the European Coal and Steel Community, established by the Schuman Declaration of 1950,[21] initially to ensure that post-World War II France and Germany would focus on economic cooperation and mutual growth. As Russia and China vie for influence in the region, the five former Soviet republics cannot afford to leave Afghanistan out of their efforts to form a regional bloc that would strengthen their economic and political clout and eventually improve the lives of all their citizens.

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