



Feature Article  
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## What the Extension of Transport Corridors in Afghanistan Means for Central Asia

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*In the current geopolitical realities, Central Asia seeks to restore its historical role as a land-based transportation and logistics hub, facilitating connections between East and West, as well as North and South. Most of the region's countries promote their own projects including railways, gas pipelines, and power lines through Afghanistan, which offer them substantial economic and geopolitical advantages. However, the intervention of major powers, including Russia, China, India, and Iran, could create a serious conflict of interest on the trans-Afghan track. To mitigate risks, Central Asian states should implement a coordinated policy for developing the southern transit direction on a mutually beneficial basis.*

Since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Central Asian countries have gained an opportunity to diversify their trade routes, resulting in a reduced reliance on Russia for transit. The current geopolitical context has enabled the region to gradually restore its historical role as a land-based transportation and logistics

hub, facilitating connections between East and West, as well as North and South.



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In developing international transport corridors, Central Asian states pay special attention to the southern transit route, where Iran and Afghanistan hold significant strategic positions. Both countries offer landlocked Central Asia critical access to open seas. While Iran has

historically served as a gateway for the region, Afghanistan is only recently beginning to assume this role. This shift is demonstrated by the Taliban government's proactive efforts to advance major transportation initiatives in collaboration with its neighboring countries.<sup>1</sup>

Since assuming power in Afghanistan, the Taliban have revived nearly all previously announced projects of regional and interregional importance. Work has been accelerated on the creation of the Kabul Corridor

(Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway), the construction of the Khaf-Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat and Herat-Kandahar railways.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, negotiations have progressed on the launch of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor.<sup>3</sup> Some of these projects are being reconsidered by external stakeholders through the lens of their own strategic

interests, leading to the emergence of new, ambitious initiatives. For instance, Turkmenistan reached an agreement with Afghanistan to construct the Torghundi-Herat-Kandahar-Spin Buldak railway, providing access to Pakistan's seaports. Subsequently, Turkmenistan invited neighboring Kazakhstan to participate in the project, recognizing its significant trade volume with Afghanistan and its geographical proximity to Russia and China—two of Eurasia's largest freight-generating hubs.<sup>4</sup>

The new route will effectively provide an alternative to the Kabul Corridor, which is championed by Uzbekistan, while simultaneously advancing the Taliban's objective of connecting Afghanistan's major cities—Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, and Kandahar—via rail. Establishing railway links between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan would also stimulate the development of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, a project initiated in 2012 with strong support from Turkey and Azerbaijan.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Afghanistan Railway Authority Announces 3 New Projects," TOLONews, April 29, 2024. (<https://tolonews.com/business-188554>)

<sup>2</sup> "MFA discloses details of the talks between delegations of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan," *Kun.uz*, October 16, 2021. (<https://kun.uz/en/92610482>); "Afghanistan and Iran plan completion of Khaf - Herat line," *International Railway Journal*, June 29, 2022. (<https://www.railjournal.com/infrastructure/afghanistan-and-iran-plan-completion-of-khaf-herat-line/>); "Mazar-Herat-Kandahar railway project to begin this year," *Ariana News*, May 2, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> "Taliban Claims Azerbaijan Committed to Revitalising Lapis Lazuli Corridor," *Afghanistan International*, September 4, 2024. (<https://www.afintl.com/en/202409042450>)

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<sup>4</sup> "Turkmenistan invites Kazakhstan to build railway through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India," *Turkic World*, July 24, 2024. (<https://turkic.world/en/articles/turkmenistan/263603>)

<sup>5</sup> Ogulgozel Rejepova, "Lapis Lazuli Corridor – Major Trade Route from Afghanistan to Europe," *Business Turkmenistan*, May 17, 2021. (<https://business.com.tm/post/7064/lazuritovyi-koridor--put-iz-afganistana-v-evropu>)

The growing involvement of Central Asian countries in the trans-Afghan transportation sector presents a significant opportunity to fully realize the region's transit potential, offering substantial economic and geopolitical advantages. However, this increased engagement may also lead to competition among Central Asian states for new transport initiatives or prompt external rival forces to exploit these opportunities to advance their own interests.

### **Long-term Plans for Afghanistan**

In July 2024, Ashgabat and Astana reached an agreement to jointly promote the Trans-Afghan Railway Corridor along the Torghundi-Herat-Kandahar-Spin Buldak route.<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter, Turkmen-Afghan negotiations took place in Kabul, where representatives from "Demiryollary" (Turkmenistan Railways) expressed their willingness to finance the construction of the railway from the Torghundi station

(Afghanistan) to Herat.<sup>7</sup> On September 11, 2024, the construction of the first section of this project, the 22-kilometer Torghundi-Sanobar railway line, was officially inaugurated with a ceremonial launch.<sup>8</sup>

The Torghundi-Herat trade route offers the potential for expansion in three distinct directions: toward the borders of Pakistan, Iran, and the shores of the Caspian Sea. The latter option aligns with the vision of revitalizing the ancient Lapis Lazuli Corridor, which would link Herat with Ashgabat, extend to the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi, provide access to the Baku International Port, and continue through Georgia to Ankara and Istanbul. This strategic configuration would enable Afghanistan to establish fast and reliable connections with Europe while simultaneously reducing its transit dependence on Iran, Pakistan, and, to some extent, Uzbekistan.

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<sup>6</sup> Official Information Source of the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, "Казахстан, Туркменистан и Афганистан обсудили строительство новой железнодорожной магистрали" ["Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan discussed the construction of a new railway"], July 20, 2024. (<https://primeminister.kz/ru/news/kazakhstan-turkmenistan-i-afganistan-obsudili-stroitelstvo-novoy-zheleznodorozhnoy-magistrali-28809>)

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<sup>7</sup> The Afghanistan Official Voice, "Deputy Minister of Public Works Meets Turkmen Railways Head in Kabul," July 30, 2024. (<https://www.alemarahenglish.af/deputy-minister-of-public-works-meets-turkmen-railways-head-in-kabul/>)

<sup>8</sup> "Turkmenistan and Afghanistan opened and laid the foundation for construction of new infrastructure facilities," Turkmenportal, September 11, 2024. (<https://turkmenportal.com/en/blog/82426/turkmenistan-and-afghanistan-opened-and-laid-the-foundation-for-construction-of-new-infrastructure-facilities>)

As for the Torghundi-Herat-Kandahar-Spin Boldak railway, its construction would represent a strategic achievement not only for Afghanistan but also for several major and middle powers in the surrounding region. While the route from Turkmenistan to Pakistan (926 km) is longer than the Kabul Corridor (647 km), on the way to Kandahar it can branch toward Iran, providing a valuable strategic advantage for the future transport corridor.

However, neither Ashgabat nor Astana appear to be considering the Iranian option at this stage. According to official statements, their primary objective is to access the Pakistani market and, through it, reach India as well as connect with the Persian Gulf countries via maritime routes.<sup>9</sup> Although the prospect of reaching India remains uncertain due to the complex relationship between Islamabad and New Delhi, the focus on the Persian Gulf is viable. Additionally, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan already have a railway connection with Iran, launched in 2014.

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<sup>9</sup> Official Information Source of the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, “Казakhstan, Туркменистан и Афганистан обсудили строительство новой железнодорожной магистрали” [“Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan Discussed the Construction of a New Railway”], July 20, 2024. (<https://primeminister.kz/ru/news/kazakhstan-turkmenistan-i-afganistan-obsudili-stroitelstvo-novoy-zheleznodorozhnoy-magistrali-28809>)

Iran is also interested in establishing an additional route to connect with Afghanistan and Central Asia, complementing the nearly completed Khaf-Herat railway.<sup>10</sup> Together with India, the Islamic Republic has long been taking practical steps to advance this objective, which will be explored further.

In the meantime, it is worth noting that Turkmenistan, as the proponent of the alternative Trans-Afghan Corridor, is already considering strategies to secure sufficient cargo for the route. Typically, large-scale infrastructure projects of this nature are primarily designed to accommodate transit flows, thereby maximizing their economic returns. For instance, the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway was conceived with this approach in mind. According to projections, by 2030, the new route could handle approximately 22 million tons annually, with the majority of this volume generated through transit.<sup>11</sup>

Ashgabat likely has similar ambitions. The selection of Kazakhstan as a partner is not coincidental, as Kazakhstan borders Russia,

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<sup>10</sup> “Herat-Khaf Railway Planned to Be Completed in 18-24 Months: Official,” TOLONews, May 28, 2024. (<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-188993>)

<sup>11</sup> Nargiza Umarova, “Uzbekistan and the New Realities of Trans-Afghan Trade,” *The Diplomat*, May 31, 2024. (<https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/uzbekistan-and-the-new-realities-of-trans-afghan-trade/>)

which, due to restricted access to the European market, is highly motivated to channel its products—particularly hydrocarbon resources—into the expansive South Asian market.

Since 2000, Russia, alongside India and Iran, has been advancing the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project, which encompasses three main transit routes: the western route through Azerbaijan, the trans-Caspian route via the Caspian Sea, and the eastern route through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Reports indicate that a fourth route might soon be added. From Moscow's perspective, this addition should be the Trans-Afghan railway.<sup>12</sup>

A year ago, the Taliban invited Russia and Kazakhstan to participate in this project, a proposal that was accepted, with each party pursuing its own strategic objectives.<sup>13</sup> Kazakhstan supports the construction of both trans-Afghan railways, recognizing that this dual approach would enhance its ability to choose the most advantageous transit country for accessing Afghanistan

and potentially leverage competition to secure favorable tariff conditions. Another advantage for Kazakhstan will be its connecting role between Russia and the Central Asian republics bordering Afghanistan. This factor likely influenced Ashgabat's decision to pursue a long-term partnership with Astana in the trans-Afghan corridor initiative.

### **Russian interests**

Moscow has equally significant reasons for seeking closer cooperation with the Taliban government on transportation initiatives—primarily driven by the need to diversify export markets for its critical raw materials. It is plausible that, to achieve this objective, Russia may also express interest in participating in the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline, a project whose construction resumed in September 2024.<sup>14</sup>

It is worth noting that the concept of establishing a new transport corridor along the North-South axis toward Pakistan—now

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<sup>12</sup> "The North-South Transport Corridor will pass through Afghanistan to Pakistan and China," *Izvestiya*, November 19, 2024. (<https://en.iz.ru/en/1793319/2024-11-19/north-south-transport-corridor-will-pass-through-afghanistan-pakistan-and-china>)

<sup>13</sup> "Taliban want Russia to take part in Trans-Afghan Railway Project," TASS, August 3, 2023. (<https://tass.com/economy/1656275>)

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<sup>14</sup> "Turkmenistan and Afghanistan launch the construction of a number of energy and transport infrastructure facilities," *News Central Asia*, September 11, 2024. (<https://www.newscentralasia.net/2024/09/11/turkmenistan-and-afghanistan-launch-the-construction-of-a-number-of-energy-and-transport-infrastructure-facilities/>)

regarded as the fourth (southern) transit branch of the project—was originally proposed by Uzbekistan. Amid rising demand for Afghan transit in 2022, Tashkent suggested launching a transregional route spanning Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and ultimately reaching the ports of the Indian Ocean, covering a total distance of 5,532 kilometers.<sup>15</sup>

A year later, the involved parties formalized their intentions by signing a memorandum of understanding.<sup>16</sup> The new corridor is expected to enable the transportation of goods from northern Eurasia to South Asia within 20 days, a transit time that is three times faster than traditional maritime routes. This proposed corridor offers a valuable alternative to trade routes through the Black, Mediterranean, and Red Seas, which have become increasingly hazardous

due to the ongoing war in Ukraine and the intensifying Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Moscow's commitment to enhancing trade with South Asian countries through Afghanistan was underscored by the visit of a Russian delegation led by Secretary of the Security Council Sergei Shoigu to Kabul on November 25, 2024. During the talks, the Russian representatives expressed support for the construction of both the Western (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan) and Eastern (Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan) railway corridors through Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> This endorsement offers Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan an opportunity to attract additional freight volumes, thereby significantly boosting the economic appeal of their flagship transport projects involving Afghanistan.

In its engagements with the Taliban government, Moscow consistently emphasizes the importance of achieving an intra-Afghan settlement. This stance aligns with Russia's broader long-term objective to deepen trade and economic cooperation with Kabul.<sup>18</sup> Establishing peace and

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<sup>15</sup> "Uzbekistan intends to create a new multimodal transport corridor along the North-South route," *UzDaily*, November 26, 2022. (<https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/uzbekistan-intends-to-create-a-new-multimodal-transport-corridor-along-the-north-south-route/>)

<sup>16</sup> "Documents on transport corridors "Belarus-Russia - Kazakhstan - Uzbekistan- Afghanistan-Pakistan" and "Russia- Caspian Sea - Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan- Kyrgyzstan" were signed in Tashkent," *Yangi O'zbekiston*, November 2, 2023. (<https://yuz.uz/en/news/v-tashkente-podpisan-dokument-po-transportnm-koridoram-belarus---rossiya---kazakhstan---uzbekistan---afganistan---pakistan-i-rossiya---kaspiskoe-more---turkmenistan---uzbekistan---krzstan>)

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<sup>17</sup> "Preparations for trans-Afghan railroad feasibility study underway - Russian deputy PM," *Interfax*, November 26, 2024. (<https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/108028/>)

<sup>18</sup> Deputy PM for Economic Affairs of Afghanistan, "The Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Meets with Russian Investors," November 17, 2024. (<https://dpmea.gov.af/index.php/1403-English-News-73>)

stability in Afghanistan is a prerequisite for building railways, gas pipelines, and other critical infrastructure. Many countries, including Russia, have expressed their readiness to support efforts aimed at restoring order, recognizing that this is essential for the successful implementation of ambitious infrastructure projects.

### **India's Alternative Strategy and Iran's Ambitions**

In the spring of 2023, the Taliban announced a plan to construct a 1,468-kilometer Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat-Kandahar railway.<sup>19</sup> This project is presented as the shortest route connecting Moscow to New Delhi via Afghanistan. The initiative aligns closely with India's strategic interest in establishing transport connections with Afghanistan and Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan.

Since 2016, India has been developing the deep-water port of Chabahar in southeastern Iran, which was a critical step toward launching the

Afghanistan-Iran-India trade corridor.<sup>20</sup> Over time, the Iranian-Indian partnership in transit transportation has led to new ambitious projects, further enhancing connectivity in the region.

In 2020, Tehran began construction of the 628-kilometer Chabahar-Zahedan railway line.<sup>21</sup> It is planned to extend this line to the city of Zaranj in Afghanistan's border province of Nimroz, and from there to Dilaram and Kandahar. The Afghan authorities have already conducted engineering surveys for the construction of the Zaranj-Kandahar railway.<sup>22</sup>

To bring the Indian route to the borders of Central Asia, it will be necessary to link the Zaranj-Kandahar transport corridor with the 811-kilometer Herat-Kandahar railway line, which represents the second section of the Trans-Afghan Railway starting from

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<sup>20</sup> "India to invest \$500m in Iranian port of Chabahar," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2016. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/23/india-invest-500m-iran-port-chabahar-modi-transit-ac-cord-afghanistan>); "India opens trade route to Central Asia," *The Independent*, October 30, 2017. (<https://theindependent.in/india-opens-trade-route-to-central-asia/>)

<sup>21</sup> "Iran begins track laying on Chabahar-Zahedan railway," *International Railway Journal*, July 8, 2020. (<https://www.railjournal.com/infrastructure/iran-begins-track-laying-on-chabahar-zahedan-railway/>)

<sup>22</sup> "آغاز مذاکرات فنی برای اتصال راه آهن کشورهای چین افغانستان ایران" ["Technical talks on rail link between China, Afghanistan and Iran have begun"], *Tinn News*, November 20, 2024. (<https://www.tinn.ir/fa/tiny/news-285955>)

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<sup>19</sup> Aamir Latif, "Afghanistan seeks regional connectivity with home-built rail project," *Anadolu Agency*, May 1, 2023. (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/afghanistan-seeks-regional-connectivity-with-home-built-rail-project/2886190>)

Torghundi station,<sup>23</sup> and then extend it either toward Turkmenistan by constructing the Torghundi-Herat railway or toward Uzbekistan by developing the Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat railway.

Although it may appear that New Delhi is taking the lead in its partnership with Tehran to develop trade routes through Afghanistan, in reality, Iran maintains an independent stance on this issue. For the Islamic Republic, Afghan transit is not solely or primarily about gaining access to Central Asia; rather, it is a strategic move to establish a faster connection with its primary trading partner—China.

With the Khaf-Herat railway nearing completion, Iran plans to extend this line to the Wakhan Valley in Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province, where the borders of China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan converge. This expansion will likely involve linking the Khaf-Herat railway to the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar corridor, taking into account the Taliban's previously announced plan to connect Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat by rail. This approach would create a more direct and efficient trade route between Iran and

China, reinforcing Iran's broader geopolitical and economic objectives.

It is worth noting that through the highlands of Badakhshan traverses one of the ancient routes of the Great Silk Road, known as the Wakhan Corridor. In September 2023, Afghan authorities began laying gravel on a 50-kilometer section of this historic route, extending from the main Kyrgyz settlement of Bozai Gumbaz in the Lesser Pamir to the Wakhjir Pass, which marks the border between Afghanistan and China.<sup>24</sup>

In August 2024, Afghanistan's Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development announced the completion of preliminary work on the Wakhan Tract.<sup>25</sup> The Taliban are actively seeking financial support from Chinese partners to transform this neglected route into a fully functional trade corridor, in which Iran is extremely interested. However, Beijing has adopted a cautious stance regarding the opening of its border with Afghanistan. This hesitation is likely influenced by lingering terrorist activity within Afghanistan. China is especially wary of Uyghur militants associated with

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<sup>23</sup> "Mazar-Herat-Kandahar railway project to begin this year," Ariana News, May 2, 2023. (<https://www.ariananews.af/mazar-herat-kandahar-railway-project-to-begin-this-year/>)

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<sup>24</sup> "Construction of Wakhan road in Badakhshan has started: Mujahid," Ariana News, November 29, 2023. (<https://www.ariananews.af/construction-of-wakhan-road-in-badakhshan-has-started-mujahid/>)

<sup>25</sup> Bibi Amina Hakimi, "Preliminary Work on Wakhan Road to China Completed," TOLONews, August 21, 2024. (<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-190341>)



the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which poses a potential security risk to its Xinjiang region.

From an economic perspective, integrating the Wakhan Corridor into the international transit system would be a valuable asset for China, which is actively investing in Afghanistan's natural resources and expanding trade with the country. The Wakhan route offers a unique advantage by not only reducing the distance between China and Afghanistan but also improving connectivity between Pakistan and Tajikistan, whose borders converge in the complex geography of the Pamir Knot.

The development of the Wakhan Corridor could significantly alter the dynamics of the Central Asian transit landscape by enhancing Tajikistan's strategic position. With this route, Tajikistan could facilitate direct connections between South and Central Asia through its territory. However, such a transformation could undermine the ambitions of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, all of which are striving to secure a strong foothold in the transport connectivity of two critical macro-regions.

## **Conclusion**

The proactive policy of the Taliban government to expand Afghanistan's transit

potential, combined with the focus of certain Central Asian countries on southern transit routes, has elevated the region's relationship with Kabul to a new level. Most Central Asian states (with the exception of Tajikistan) are rapidly advancing trade, economic, and investment cooperation with Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan is spearheading several joint initiatives with the Taliban, most notably the construction of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway. Over the past year, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have also intensified their engagement, promoting their own vision of the Trans-Afghan Corridor, which would provide access to Pakistani ports. While competition between these two ambitious projects is inevitable, it is likely to manifest in a complex, dual nature.

Firstly, the existence of alternative trade routes through Afghanistan will reduce transportation costs, thereby enhancing the overall profitability of these transit corridors.

Secondly, the development of trans-Afghan transport routes aligns with Russia's strategic interests, as it presents an opportunity to extend its flagship North-South Transport Corridor to Pakistan. Moscow's involvement in the creation of both the western (from Turkmenistan's border) and eastern (from Uzbekistan's

border) railway routes through Afghanistan will enable Tashkent and Ashgabat to attract a portion of the freight flows from Northern Eurasia to South Asia. Consequently, competition for transit traffic between these Central Asian states appears inevitable.

Iran has already positioned itself in this competition by initiating the construction of the Khaf-Herat railway and planning to launch an additional railway link with Afghanistan through the border province of Nimroz. This indicates that the race to secure a foothold in regional transit networks is intensifying, with multiple countries vying to enhance their strategic and economic influence.

Iran holds a unique position within the INSTC, managing the entire volume of Russian cargo transported via warm seas to India. Due to its geography, the Islamic Republic is well-positioned to capitalize on the supposed fourth extension of the INSTC, potentially offering an alternative to Afghan transit for trade between Russia and Pakistan.

This scenario poses a significant challenge for Uzbekistan, as it could diminish the prospects of the Kabul Corridor, a project in which Tashkent has placed considerable hopes. Should Iran successfully establish itself as the primary transit route towards Pakistan, Uzbekistan's ambitions to become a key player in the North-South connectivity

framework could be undermined, leading to increased competition and geopolitical complexity in the region.

The Afghan government's enthusiasm for opening the Wakhan Corridor, a move that Tehran strongly supports, presents potential risks for most Central Asian states. These countries currently serve as crucial transit hubs connecting major economic centers such as Russia, India, and China.

If direct transport links are established between Afghanistan and China through the Wakhan Valley in the Lesser Pamirs, it could significantly reduce the strategic importance of existing trade routes that pass through Central Asia to connect East and South Asia. Such a development might shift trade flows away from Central Asian countries, potentially diminishing their roles as key nodes in interregional logistics networks, as well as their economic and geopolitical influence.

Central Asian countries must be well-prepared for any shifts in the trans-Afghan transit landscape. To mitigate risks, they should develop a unified and coordinated policy for advancing the southern transit direction. Achieving synergy in the implementation of international transport corridors is crucial, ensuring that the interests of all Central Asian nations are considered. Such a collaborative approach would not only

enhance regional stability but also promote sustainable economic growth by maximizing the collective benefits of improved connectivity and trade opportunities.

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