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AFGHANISTAN AS UZBEKISTAN'S SOUTHERN GATEWAY: STRATEGIC CONNECTIVITY, ECONOMIC INTEGRATION, AND REGIONAL TRANSFORMATION

by Sibghatullah Arsalai
researcher and analyst, policy advisor, and business strategist

Aziza Mukhammedova
Leading Research Fellow
Center for Afghanistan and South Asian Studies

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by Sibghatullah Arsalai, Aziza Mukhammedova

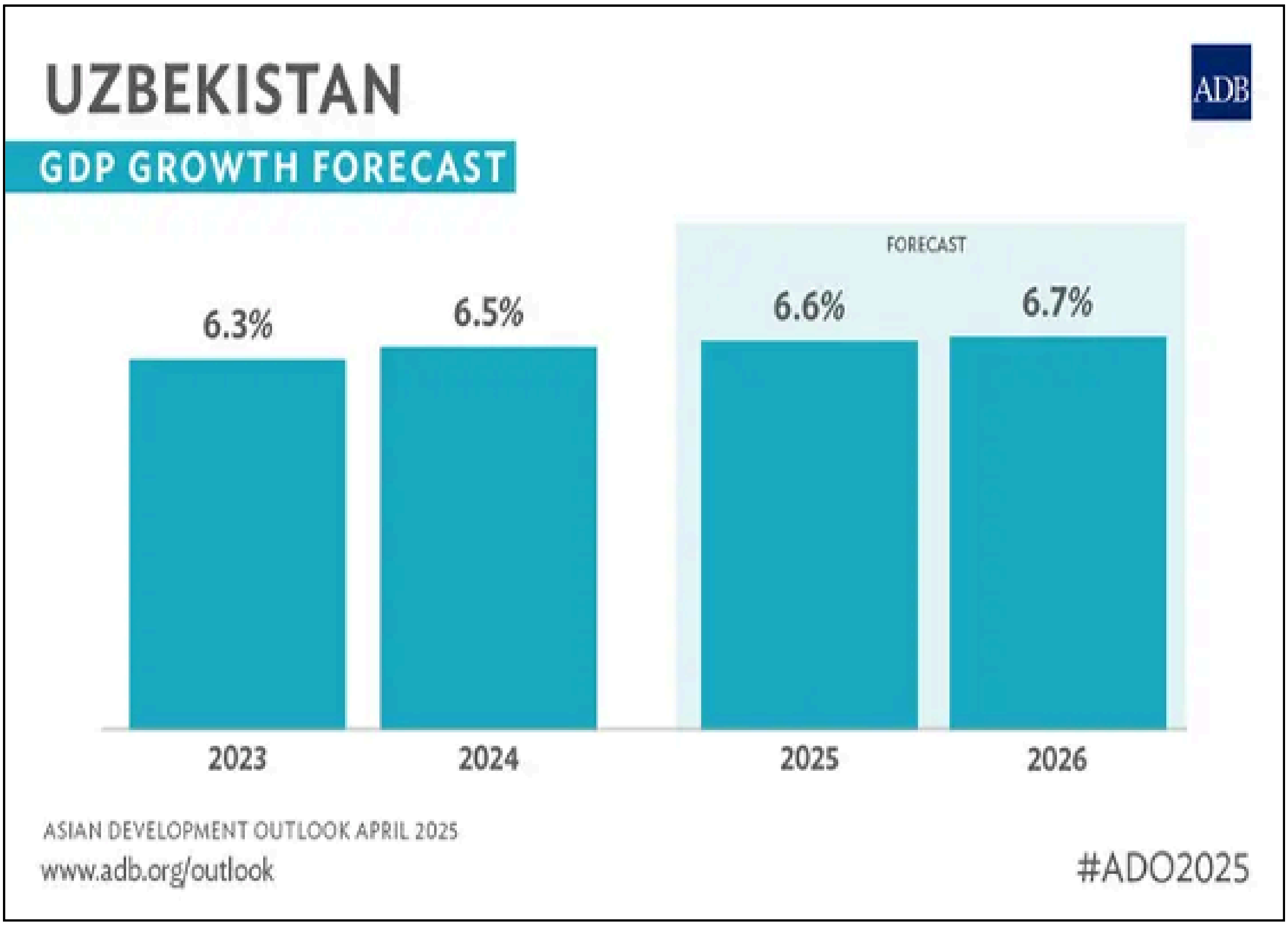
Abstract

The paper is inspired by participation in a workshop named "Generating an Economic Vision for Afghanistan" in Tashkent in December 2025. The workshop was co-hosted by the Institute for Advanced International Studies, University of World Economy and Diplomacy, and the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame.

The participants came from Central Asian countries, Afghanistan and the United States. The participants from Uzbekistan showed vision, preparedness and willingness to tackle challenges regarding Afghanistan in a pragmatic manner. From Central Asian perspective, it is concluded that Afghanistan is no more seen as a security threat but an economic opportunity, and if properly integrated to the Central Asian region, can prosper itself and benefit the region. This paper is an effort to advance this shared vision.

Introduction

Since 2016, Uzbekistan has emerged as one of the most dynamic reformers in Central Asia. Economic liberalization, currency reforms, investment promotion, regional diplomacy, and infrastructure development have transformed the country's economic trajectory. Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has pursued a vision of modernization that seeks not only domestic prosperity but also greater regional integration. These reforms have contributed to increased foreign investment, improved trade relations, and sustained economic growth. According to the World Bank data, the average growth of real GDP is estimated to be about 6% annually since 2017, which is eye catching for middle-income countries like Uzbekistan.



Similarly, there is an above average forecast of 6.7% real GDP growth by the Asian Development Bank. The data indicates that the country is making a steady and positive progress, in most part due to the strategic leadership and a progressive reform agenda by Tashkent.

Despite these achievements, Uzbekistan continues to face a structural challenge shared by many Central Asian states: geography. As a doubly landlocked country, Uzbekistan's long-term economic potential depends heavily on access to external markets. While traditional trade routes connect Uzbekistan northward and westward, the greatest untapped opportunity lies to the south.

South Asia contains some of the world's largest and fastest-growing economies, including Pakistan and India, with a combined population exceeding 1.8 billion people. Access to these markets would fundamentally alter Uzbekistan's economic prospects. In order to maintain the steady GDP growth or in fact further improve it, it is rational for Tashkent to open up to the South Asian markets via Afghanistan.

This paper argues that Afghanistan represents the most important strategic gateway for Uzbekistan's next phase of economic development. Rather than viewing Afghanistan solely through the lens of conflict, fragility, or instability, policymakers should recognize its unique geographic position as a bridge connecting Central Asia with South Asia. A stable and connected Afghanistan would create substantial economic benefits for Uzbekistan through expanded trade, transit revenues, logistics development, and energy exports. Moreover, successful connectivity would generate positive spillover effects for Kazakhstan, Russia, Pakistan, India, China, the Gulf states, and Afghanistan itself.

Using a game-theory framework, this paper examines strategic options available to Uzbekistan and proposes a ten-year connectivity compact designed to maximize mutual gains while reducing security and geopolitical risks.

Uzbekistan's Economic Transformation and Vision 2030

Over the past decade, Uzbekistan has pursued one of the most ambitious reform programs in post-Soviet Eurasia. Economic liberalization measures introduced since 2016 have improved the investment climate, encouraged entrepreneurship, expanded trade, and strengthened regional cooperation. These reforms have coincided with sustained GDP growth and increased foreign direct investment.

Uzbekistan's Vision 2030 places particular emphasis on industrial modernization, export diversification, infrastructure development, technological innovation, and regional connectivity. The country's strategic objective is not merely to produce more goods but to position itself as a regional economic hub linking major markets across Eurasia.

However, domestic reforms alone cannot achieve these goals. Future economic growth increasingly depends on access to external markets and efficient transport corridors. South Asia represents a particularly attractive destination because of its large population, expanding middle class, and growing demand for energy, manufactured products, and agricultural goods. As Saida insightfully utters, “ the challenge is geographical. Direct access to South Asia requires transit through Afghanistan. Consequently, Afghanistan is no longer simply a neighboring country; it is becoming a strategic component of Uzbekistan's economic future. Afghanistan remains central to Uzbekistan’s South Asia strategy, trade corridors, Termez logistics, and the Trans-Afghan railway vision”.

Afghanistan as Strategic Economic Geography

The dominant international literature often portrays Afghanistan primarily as a fragile state characterized by insecurity, political uncertainty, narcotics production, and economic underdevelopment.

While these challenges remain important, such perspectives frequently underestimate Afghanistan's long-term economic potential.

Afghanistan possesses a unique geographic position at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Western China. Historically, this location made Afghanistan an important crossroad along trade routes connecting civilizations and markets. In the twenty-first century, the same geography can once again become a source of economic value.

Afghanistan's greatest asset is not necessarily its mineral wealth, agricultural potential, or youthful population. Its greatest asset is its location. Geography itself can be monetized through transit infrastructure, logistics services, trade facilitation, and regional connectivity. "With an understanding of Afghanistan's geostrategic position at the heart of the Asian continent, particularly in its role as a connector among key Asian regions including Central Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and West Asia, and given the country's considerable political, economic, security, and cultural capacities, it can be asserted that Afghanistan possesses both potential and actual capabilities to play a significant role at the regional, transregional, and global levels. Afghanistan, as a natural linking hub between important Asian regions, not only connects transportation, energy, and trade routes, but also facilitates extensive cultural and security interactions" (Farahuddin Chaghaty & Bagramwal, 2025).

For Uzbekistan, Afghanistan represents the shortest and most practical route toward Pakistani ports on the Arabian Sea. Such access would significantly reduce transportation costs, improve export competitiveness, and diversify trade routes. More importantly, it would transform Uzbekistan from a landlocked state into a participant in major north-south economic corridors. "If realized, this dream come true will provide Central Asian Republics (CARs) with the shortest and cheapest route to the Arabian Sea" (Rabbani, 2022).

A connected Afghanistan would also attract international investment into transportation networks, energy infrastructure, mining projects, and industrial zones. This would create economic opportunities not only for Afghanistan but also for neighboring states seeking access to South Asian markets.

Strategic Interaction: A Game-Theory Analysis

From a strategic perspective, Uzbekistan faces three broad options regarding Afghanistan.

The first option is passive engagement. Under this approach, Uzbekistan would limit involvement and wait for Afghanistan's internal situation to stabilize independently. While this strategy minimizes immediate risks and financial commitments, it also delays economic opportunities. Competitors may establish influence first, infrastructure development may stagnate, and Uzbekistan may lose valuable time in pursuing southern connectivity. The overall payoff of passive engagement is therefore relatively low.

The second option is selective engagement. This approach involves limited investments in trade, border infrastructure, and targeted projects while avoiding major commitments. Selective engagement offers moderate benefits and reduces exposure to uncertainty. However, it does not fundamentally transform regional connectivity because critical infrastructure gaps remain unresolved. As a result, economic gains are incremental rather than transformational.

The third option is deep strategic engagement. This strategy involves substantial investment in railways, energy corridors, logistics centers, and economic partnerships. While it carries greater risks due to financial commitments and political and security uncertainties, it also offers the highest potential rewards. Successful implementation would position Uzbekistan as the primary gateway connecting Central Asia with South Asia while generating significant long-term economic benefits.

From a game-theory perspective, as indicated in the chart below, deep engagement produces the highest collective payoff if stability can be maintained. The challenge therefore becomes creating institutional mechanisms that align incentives among participating actors and reduce the likelihood of conflict or disruption.

Strategic Engagement Framework

Strategy	Risk Level	Investment Level	Connectivity Impact	Expected Payoff
Passive Engagement	Low	Low	Limited	Low
Selective Engagement	Moderate	Moderate	Partial	Medium
Deep Strategic Engagement	High	High	Transformational	High

Looking at the literature and news reports, it seems that the Central Asian states particularly Uzbekistan has realized the importance of deepening relations with Afghanistan for higher payoffs. “The Central Asian states are likely to deepen their relations with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, primarily owing to their interest in cooperating on economic, transport, and energy issues. This would allow them to continue diversifying their foreign and trade policies. Further diplomatic engagement and eventual official recognition of the Taliban government cannot be ruled out, particularly if Uzbekistan takes such a step and once the states of the region agree on a common strategy towards Afghanistan (Zielińska, 2025).

Regional Economic Multipliers and Shared Benefits

One concern often raised by policymakers is whether the costs of connectivity projects outweigh the benefits for Uzbekistan. However, regional economic analysis suggests that Uzbekistan would benefit not only from its own trade but also from the trade of others.

Kazakhstan, with its larger economy and substantial export capacity, would gain access to shorter routes connecting Central Asia with South Asian markets. Increased Kazakh exports moving southward would generate transit revenues, railway income, customs fees, and logistics activity within Uzbekistan. "Kazakhstan seems to have far greater interests in cooperation with Afghanistan using the geographical location of the country as a trade corridor for reaching South Asian ports. Kazakhstan is particularly interested in participating in the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan's infrastructure, especially in the fields of transport, energy, and agriculture" (Mukhammedova, 2024).

If a sound logistical infrastructure is in place, Russia will present a similar opportunity. South Asian economies possess significant energy demand, particularly for natural gas, petroleum products, and electricity. Enhanced connectivity through Afghanistan would facilitate energy exports from Russia and Central Asia toward Pakistan and potentially India. Every shipment moving through regional corridors creates economic value for transit countries, including Uzbekistan.

Rather than viewing itself solely as an exporter, Uzbekistan can position itself as a corridor manager. The country would generate revenue not only from goods produced domestically but also from the movement of goods, energy, and services throughout the broader region.

This perspective transforms geography into an economic asset. The greater the volume of regional commerce flowing through Uzbekistan-linked corridors, the greater the financial returns through transit fees, logistics services, customs revenues, warehousing, and associated industries.

A Ten-Year Afghanistan-Uzbekistan Connectivity Compact

To maximize these opportunities, this paper proposes an Afghanistan-Uzbekistan Connectivity Compact covering the period from 2026 to 2036.

The compact would be based on a simple principle: each side contributes assets that the other lacks.

Afghanistan contributes strategic geography, labor, agricultural land, and access to South Asian markets. Uzbekistan contributes infrastructure expertise, logistics networks, investment, technology, and regional leadership.

It is pragmatic to encourage countries and entities interested in the development and investment in the region. Particularly, the Gulf countries, which are interested in the security and integration of the Central and South Asian regions.

In a joint workshop between foreign ministries of Uzbekistan and Qatar in 2026, similar conclusions were made. “Afghanistan should be reframed as a strategic opportunity, not only a threat: long-term stability cannot emerge from security mechanisms alone but requires economic interdependence, infrastructure, trade and employment generation. Second, the international community should adopt ‘creative engagement’ with the de facto authorities — pragmatic dialogue and active encouragement of economic reform. Third, Uzbekistan and Qatar should jointly promote and, where feasible, jointly realize major infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, of which the Trans-Afghan Railway is the natural flagship — a project on a scale the country has never before seen” (Atalay-Ustun & Salha, 2026).

Pillar One: The Trans-Afghan Railway
The Trans-Afghan Railway should serve as the flagship project of regional integration. By connecting Central Asia with Pakistani ports, the railway would reduce transportation costs and improve trade efficiency.

Uzbekistan's contribution would include financing, engineering expertise, and logistical coordination. Afghanistan's contribution shall consist of secure transit access, regulatory predictability, and long-term operational cooperation.

The result would be a mutually beneficial arrangement in which Afghanistan monetizes geography while Uzbekistan monetizes connectivity and trade.

Pillar Two: AI-Driven Agricultural Modernization
The construction of the Qosh-Tepa Canal has generated concerns regarding regional water management. Traditional approaches often frame water as a zero-sum issue in which one country's gain becomes another country's loss.

A more innovative approach would treat water as a platform for productivity enhancement.

Under a multilateral partnership involving Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and the GCC countries, advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, satellite monitoring, precision agriculture, drip irrigation, and smart water management systems could significantly improve agricultural efficiency.

Afghanistan would contribute land, water, and labor. Uzbekistan would provide technical expertise and agricultural know-how. Qatar particularly, and other Gulf states could provide investment capital motivated by long-term food security concerns. “A digital economy and AI track, anchored by the digital transformation partnership signed between Invest Qatar and Uzbekistan’s Ministry of Digital Technologies in February 2025, can leverage Uzbekistan’s deep tech-talent pool — including tens of thousands of programmers trained through the country’s national IT initiatives. Agriculture and food security have been a critical priority for Qatar since the 2017 blockade. Uzbekistan is well placed to supplement Qatari production during the summer months, when local agricultural output drops sharply” (Atalay-Ustun & Salha, 2026).

If Uzbekistan and Qatar could cooperate on the agricultural and water management concerns around the Qosh-Tepa canal, such cooperation would transform potential tensions into shared economic opportunities.

Pillar Three: Mining and Industrial Corridors

Afghanistan possesses substantial mineral resources, including copper, iron ore, lithium, and rare earth elements. Rather than exporting raw materials, regional partners should develop value-added processing industries near transportation corridors.

Joint industrial zones could facilitate manufacturing, mineral processing, packaging, and export-oriented production. This approach would create employment, increase tax revenues, and generate broader economic multipliers.

Pillar Four: Regional Development and Risk-Sharing Fund

A dedicated development fund involving Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Gulf investors, multilateral development banks, and international financial institutions could help reduce investment risks.

By distributing risk across multiple stakeholders, the fund would improve the financial viability of large-scale infrastructure projects while encouraging private-sector participation.

From the Great Game to the Great Economic Game

Historically, Afghanistan occupied a central position in the geopolitical rivalry known as the Great Game. During the nineteenth century, competition between the British and Russian Empires transformed Afghanistan into a buffer state designed to separate competing spheres of influence.

The twenty-first century offers an opportunity to replace geopolitical competition with economic cooperation.

Russia will potentially benefit from expanded energy exports and transportation access. The United States will benefit from a reduction in instability, terrorism, and regional insecurity. China will benefit from improved security conditions, expanded market access, and opportunities for resource development. Pakistan will gain transit revenues, energy imports, and increased commercial activity. India will benefit from greater access to Central Asian markets and resources.

It should be underlined that the barriers to the regional connectivity are real and cannot be ignored, however, pragmatic forward looking leadership, such that is shown by Tashkent since 2016 can potentially overcome or maneuver them. Michaël LEVYSTONE has rightly pointed to the challenges, “The first is financial, since not all Central Asian countries have sufficient resources to renovate their transport infrastructure or build new one (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan).

The second is geographical, in that Central Asia is stuck between the Caspian Sea (which does not flow into the ocean), big powers that need to be kept sweet (Russia, China, Iran) and an uncertain neighbor, Afghanistan, which complicates Central Asian countries' desire to connect to South Asia". Although geopolitical rivalries will continue, connectivity projects create incentives for cooperation and makes the region hostage to peace because all major actors stand to gain from stability and economic growth.

We would cautiously argue that even Pakistan, whose policies have often been influenced by short-term political and security considerations, possesses strong long-term incentives to support regional integration. Increased trade, transit revenues, industrial growth, and energy security could generate benefits that exceed those available through traditional geopolitical competition.

In this context, Afghanistan becomes not a battleground for influence but a platform for shared prosperity.

Challenges: Turning Strategic Connectivity into Bankable Integration

The strategic logic of Afghanistan–Uzbekistan connectivity is compelling, but geography alone does not create an economic corridor. The proposed Central Asia–Afghanistan–South Asia architecture concentrates political, security, financial, institutional, and environmental risks along a single chain. A disruption at any critical point could weaken the economic value of the entire corridor. The key task is therefore to further strengthen the resilience of Uzbekistan's deepening engagement with Afghanistan to potential political and economic shocks.

The first challenge concerns **political recognition, regulatory uncertainty, and financial isolation**. Broader international recognition of the Taliban government remains limited, while Afghanistan's banking system and access to international financial channels remain constrained. Large infrastructure projects require enforceable contracts, insurance, predictable taxation, dispute-resolution mechanisms, and confidence that capital can move across borders. Consequently, even strategically attractive projects may struggle to become financially executable. Political-risk guarantees, transparent procurement, and credible financing mechanisms will therefore be essential.

The second challenge is **security and the vulnerability of the southern corridor to political disruption beyond Afghanistan itself**. Its viability depends not only on security inside Afghanistan but also on stable Afghanistan–Pakistan relations. Recurrent border tensions and interruptions to trade demonstrate that access to Pakistani ports cannot be treated as permanently guaranteed. For Uzbekistan, southern connectivity can further diversify the country's transport options and complement its existing network of regional corridors. The objective should therefore be the continued diversification and resilience of Uzbekistan's connectivity architecture.

A third challenge is the **commercial viability of the Trans-Afghan Railway**. The long-term commercial viability of the Trans-Afghan Railway will depend on ensuring that the strong political momentum behind the project is supported by sustainable freight demand and sound economic assumptions.

Before large-scale construction, the project must establish realistic assumptions regarding cargo volumes, tariffs, engineering and maintenance costs, border delays, insurance, and competition from alternative corridors. The existing Termez–Hairatan–Mazar-e-Sharif axis could therefore serve as a testing ground for deeper integration. Improvements in customs, warehousing, digital documentation, railway capacity, and border management could generate immediate gains while providing empirical evidence of future demand.

The fourth challenge concerns **water and the Qosh-Tepa Canal**. Afghanistan's agricultural development can support employment and long-term stability, but expanded withdrawals from the Amu Darya may create serious concerns for downstream states, particularly Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Technologies such as satellite monitoring, precision agriculture, and drip irrigation can improve efficiency, but t**echnology cannot substitute for water governance**. Agricultural cooperation should therefore be accompanied by structured Uzbekistan–Afghanistan dialogue on hydrological data exchange, joint monitoring, irrigation efficiency, and mutually acceptable principles of water use.

A fifth challenge is **institutional capacity and corridor governance**. Infrastructure alone does not create efficient connectivity. The competitiveness of the corridor will depend on customs procedures, border waiting times, tariff predictability, documentation, cargo tracking, railway standards, and dispute resolution. Digital customs systems, harmonized transit rules, transparent tariffs, and coordinated border management may ultimately be as important as railway construction itself.

The sixth challenge concerns **geopolitical competition**. Russia, China, Pakistan, the Gulf states, Kazakhstan, and other actors may all benefit from a more connected Afghanistan, but they may also support competing routes, financing models, and strategic preferences. Uzbekistan therefore has an interest in presenting the corridor as an open, commercially driven, and non-exclusive project rather than as an instrument of any geopolitical bloc.

Finally, connectivity must generate visible benefits inside Afghanistan. If transit revenues and investment are concentrated among a limited number of actors while local communities receive few employment or development opportunities, the corridor may generate new grievances. Local employment, transparent tariffs, logistics services, industrial zones, and value-added production should therefore accompany transit infrastructure.

These challenges do not weaken the case for deep strategic engagement. Rather, they underline the value of a phased approach in which infrastructure development is accompanied by stronger transit arrangements, financing mechanisms, water cooperation, and institutional coordination. Existing infrastructure around Termez, Hairatan, and Mazar-e-Sharif can be further strengthened in parallel with continued progress on the Trans-Afghan Railway, while growing freight volumes and improved risk-management mechanisms can further enhance the project's long-term commercial sustainability.

From a game-theory perspective, deep engagement may generate the highest collective payoff only when institutions reduce the ability of individual actors to impose disproportionate costs through disruption or non-cooperation. The ultimate objective of the proposed connectivity compact should therefore be not simply to finance infrastructure, but to progressively de-risk interdependence. In this way, economic integration can itself increase the cost of instability and strengthen incentives for long-term regional cooperation.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's future should not be assessed solely through the lens of conflict or fragility. Despite significant political, security, financial, and institutional challenges, its strategic geography provides a unique opportunity for regional economic transformation.

For Uzbekistan, the pursuit of Vision 2030 requires access to new markets, diversified transport routes, and deeper regional connectivity. Afghanistan offers the most direct pathway toward South Asia, and this opportunity can be advanced through a phased approach combining strategic ambition with effective risk management. Southern connectivity would further complement Uzbekistan's existing corridors and strengthen the diversification and resilience of the country's transport network.

The benefits of successful integration would extend beyond Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, creating new trade, transit, energy, and investment opportunities for Kazakhstan, Russia, China, Pakistan, India, and the Gulf states. Yet infrastructure alone will not ensure these gains. Commercial viability, predictable transit arrangements, effective border management, water cooperation, and credible financing mechanisms will be equally important.

The central challenge is therefore not whether Afghanistan matters, but how its geography can be converted into a sustainable and resilient economic asset. Through sequenced infrastructure development, stronger corridor governance, and mechanisms that reduce shared risks, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan can gradually transform a historically contested frontier into a bridge between Central and South Asia. In this sense, the emerging "Great Economic Game" should be built not simply on interdependence, but on **de-risked interdependence**.

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Institute for Advanced International Studies
at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy
54, Mustakillik Avenue
Tashkent 100007, Uzbekistan

+998 71 267 58 44
info@iais.uz
www.iais.uz

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Institute for Advanced International Studies