



Enhancing Regional Growth by Overcoming Economic Integration Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the systemic barriers hindering regional economic integration and their implications for broader regional growth. Focusing on qualitative analysis of policy reports, trade data, and regional agreements, it identifies key challenges such as political instability, security concerns, inadequate infrastructure, restrictive trade policies, and weak financial systems that limit effective integration and regional development. The research highlights how insecurity and governance issues deter foreign investment and trade partnerships, while underdeveloped transport and energy networks obstruct connectivity among neighbouring countries. Furthermore, complex trade regulations and limited access to international finance restrict economic cooperation and growth potential. The findings underscore the critical importance of promoting political stability, simplifying trade regulations, and strengthening financial systems to enhance regional integration. Collaborative efforts in infrastructure development and transit facilitation, coupled with international support for institutional reforms, are essential to overcoming these barriers. Such measures will not only facilitate seamless economic integration but also contribute to sustainable regional growth and stability.

Keywords: Regional Economic Integration ▪ Economic Growth ▪ Integration Challenges ▪ Central Asia ▪ Infrastructure

1. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan's potential for integration into regional and global economic systems is pivotal, being located in a strategic position that is crucial to both Central and South Asia. With its closeness to major regional players such as Iran, Pakistan, China, and the Central Asian republics, Afghanistan has the opportunity to become a key player in regional trade, energy, and infrastructure development. However, despite its geographic advantages, the country remains largely marginalized from regional economic processes. Afghanistan's integration into the wider regional economy could not only accelerate its development but also contribute to the over-

all stability and welfare of the region. Stronger regional cooperation has the potential to boost trade flows, improve infrastructure, and foster institutional frameworks that promote peace and economic interdependence with border countries. The country, however, faces a series of systemic challenges that can be barriers to its path toward economic integration. The foremost obstacle remains political instability, which has been strengthened by ongoing security concerns. These issues have created an environment of uncertainty that limits foreign investment, disrupts trade networks, and undermines the establishment of stable economic policies. The continued conflict has made it difficult for Afghanistan to develop

reliable governance structures that can effectively support regional economic cooperation. Alongside political instability, Afghanistan's infrastructure remains underdeveloped, with deficiencies in critical sectors such as transportation, energy, and communications. These infrastructure gaps create logistical problems that stop the efficient movement of goods and services, both within the country and across borders. The lack of energy resources and transport routes further isolates Afghanistan from regional economic activity, limiting its potential to engage in cross-border trade and investment.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Afghanistan's economic isolation from regional trade routes comes from decades of political instability, security challenges, and underdeveloped infrastructure. Despite its strategic geographic location between Central and South Asia, the country has been unable to capitalize on its potential as a regional trade hub. Persistent internal conflicts, weak governance, and security concerns have hindered the development of critical infrastructure needed to support trade and economic growth. Additionally, restrictive trade policies and a weak financial system have further limited Afghanistan's ability to integrate into regional economic networks.

While Uzbekistan has played a notable role in facilitating trade with Afghanistan, particularly through road and rail connections, the broader regional powers, such as Pakistan, China, and Iran, hold greater influence over Afghanistan's economic integration. The policies, political dynamics, and economic relationships of these countries significantly shape Afghanistan's ability to participate in regional trade. Without coordinated efforts from these key regional players, Afghanistan remains disconnected from vital trade routes, stifling its economic development and preventing its integration into global markets.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Identifying internal and external barriers. This objective focuses on identifying the internal and external barriers, such as political instability, security issues, and infrastructure deficits, that hinder Afghanistan's effective participation in regional economic processes.

Analyzing how regional cooperation can address these challenges. The research explores how collective regional efforts, such as improved trade agreements, infrastructure development, and policy reforms, can help overcome Afghanistan's economic isolation and create new opportunities for regional trade and growth.

Exploring regional partnerships and proposing solutions for economic recovery. This objective investigates how Afghanistan can strengthen its partnerships with key regional players such as Pakistan, China, Iran, and Uzbekistan. It focuses on the role these partnerships can play in addressing Afghanistan's economic challenges and how they can be leveraged to support the country's recovery and integration into the regional economy.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the major barriers to Afghanistan's regional integration? This question seeks to identify the primary political, economic, and logistical obstacles that have prevented Afghanistan from becoming a fully integrated participant in regional trade and economic networks.

How can regional cooperation contribute to Afghanistan's economic development? This question explores the potential benefits of greater regional collaboration in addressing Afghanistan's barriers to integration.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Afghanistan's integration challenges are complicated, encompassing political instability, security concerns, and infrastructure deficits. These issues have significantly affected the nation's development and its economic relations with neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran, and Uzbekistan. Regional organizations, such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), have also played a role in addressing these challenges.

5.1 Political Instability and Security Concerns

Afghanistan has experienced prolonged political instability, marked by frequent changes in governance and challenges in establishing effective state institutions. This instability has been exacerbated by the resurgence of the Taliban in 2021, leading to a significant decline in security across various regions. The presence of foreign militants and ongoing internal conflicts have further destabilized the country, making it challenging to establish a secure environment conducive to development. A report by the United States Institute of Peace highlights that even with district council elections, security deficits leave numerous districts in need of alternative mechanisms for selection [14].

5.2 Infrastructure Deficits

Afghanistan's underdeveloped infrastructure remains a major obstacle to its regional economic integration. Weak transportation networks, insufficient energy supplies, and outdated trade logistics continue to hinder cross-border trade and economic connectivity. Wolf [16] highlights that Afghanistan's geographic position should ideally allow it to serve as a bridge between South and Central Asia. However, due to a lack of infrastructure, the country remains largely excluded from major regional trade corridors. While large-scale projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) could provide Afghanistan with improved connectivity, reliance on Pakistan's transit routes creates significant vulnerabilities. This dependency not only subjects Afghanistan to political instability in Pakistan but also limits its ability to establish diversified trade partnerships.

An alternative approach to infrastructure development is emerging through cooperation with Uzbekistan, which has taken active steps to support Afghanistan's regional integration. Rashid [9] notes that Uzbekistan's investments in railway expansion and energy supply offer Afghanistan a vital link to Central Asian markets. The Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-

Pakistan Railway Project is one of the most promising initiatives aimed at reducing Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan-controlled ports by offering a direct trade route between Central Asia and South Asia. However, Afghanistan's internal security issues and political instability continue to slow the full implementation of these projects.

Another significant infrastructure challenge is Afghanistan's dependence on energy imports. Stronski [11] points out that while Afghanistan imports electricity from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, weak domestic infrastructure prevents effective distribution. Frequent power shortages and outdated transmission networks increase operational costs for businesses, discouraging foreign direct investment (FDI) and limiting industrial growth. Afghanistan's reliance on imported energy also creates long-term economic risks, as shifts in regional energy policies could directly affect its access to affordable power. Without substantial upgrades to its domestic energy infrastructure, Afghanistan's economic growth will remain constrained.

Despite these challenges, regional cooperation remains a crucial factor in addressing Afghanistan's infrastructure deficits. Wolf [16] and Rashid [9] both emphasize that while external investments are necessary, Afghanistan must also implement governance reforms to ensure long-term sustainability. Security improvements, regulatory reforms, and transparent trade policies will be essential to maximizing the benefits of infrastructure investments. Without these complementary efforts, Afghanistan risks remaining economically isolated, dependent on a limited number of trade routes and energy suppliers rather than achieving full integration into regional economic networks.

5.3 Economic Relations with Neighboring Countries

Pakistan. Trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been significant, with both countries relying on each other for transit trade. However, political tensions and security concerns have often disrupted trade flows. An analysis of the trade relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan indicates that while there is potential for increased trade, issues such as border management and political relations have been obstacles [13].

Iran. Iran has been a key trading partner for Afghanistan, exporting goods worth nearly \$2 billion in 2018. This trade includes construction materials, electricity, and various consumer goods. The economic relationship between Iran and Afghanistan has been influenced by geopolitical factors, including the U.S.–Iran confrontation and regional security dynamics [15].

Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan has strengthened its economic ties with Afghanistan, with trade increasing sixfold in 2023, reaching \$266 million [6]. This growth signifies a strengthening of economic relations despite political changes in Afghanistan.

5.4 Role of Regional Organizations

Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). ECO aims to promote economic, technical, and cultural cooperation among member states, which can contribute to Afghanistan's integration efforts. ECO members were among the first countries to support the peace process in Afghanistan after the collapse of the ruling Taliban regime [5].

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). SCO engages with Afghanistan, primarily focusing on security and economic cooperation. While Afghanistan is not a full member, it has been involved in SCO activities, which can influence its integration challenges [10].

Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC). CAREC is a partnership of 11 countries and development partners working together to promote development through regional cooperation. CAREC focuses on building regional transport networks, enhancing regional trade, and securing efficient energy, aligning with Afghanistan's National Development Strategy [3].

Afghanistan's integration challenges are multifaceted, involving political instability, security concerns, and infrastructure deficits. Economic relationships with neighboring countries have shown both growth and complexity, and regional organizations such as ECO, SCO, and CAREC play roles in addressing these challenges through various cooperative initiatives.

5.5 Regional Cooperation and Economic Integration

Regional integration theories explore how countries collaborate to achieve economic, political, and social objectives [8, 12]. Key theories include:

Economic Interdependence. This theory proposes that as countries become economically interdependent, the costs of conflict rise, making cooperation more attractive. The theory suggests that economic ties can lead to political stability and peace.

Neofunctionalism. Neofunctionalism argues that integration in one sector can spill over into others, leading to deeper integration. It emphasizes the role of supranational institutions in promoting integration beyond the control of individual states.

Intergovernmentalism. This approach suggests that states remain the primary actors in integration processes, and decisions are made through intergovernmental negotiations. It emphasizes the role of national governments in shaping the pace and scope of integration.

5.6 Examples of Landlocked Countries Overcoming Integration Barriers

Landlocked countries often face challenges such as high transportation costs and limited access to global markets. However, through regional cooperation, some have successfully mitigated these barriers.

Mongolia. Mongolia has leveraged its strategic location between Russia and China to enhance trade and economic cooperation. Initiatives such as the Mongolia–Russia–China Economic Corridor aim to improve infrastructure and facilitate trade, reducing the disadvantages of being landlocked.

Central Asian States. Countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have engaged in regional agreements to improve connectivity and trade. For instance, the CAREC program focuses on building transport networks and enhancing trade facilitation among member states [3].

5.7 Uzbekistan's Contribution to Regional Integration

Uzbekistan has undertaken several infrastructure projects to enhance regional connectivity.

Transport Corridors. The country has invested in developing transport corridors that connect Central Asia with South Asia and the Middle East, facilitating trade and economic integration [2, 7].

Energy Projects. Uzbekistan has been involved in regional energy projects, including the construction of power lines and gas pipelines, to improve energy security and foster economic cooperation [4].

5.8 Trade Relations with Afghanistan

Uzbekistan's trade relations with Afghanistan are a significant aspect of broader regional integration. Trade between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan has increased, with Uzbekistan exporting goods such as electricity, construction materials, and consumer products to Afghanistan. The establishment of economic zones along the border has facilitated trade and investment, contributing to economic development in both countries.

6. METHODOLOGY

Afghanistan has prioritized regional economic integration as a means to enhance trade, connectivity, and economic stability. Key initiatives and strategies include the following.

Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA). This platform promotes regional dialogue and collaboration, focusing on Afghanistan's integration into South and Central Asian economic networks. RECCA emphasizes infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and transit agreements.

Lapis Lazuli Corridor. Launched in 2018, this transit route connects Afghanistan to Turkey via Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. It aims to provide Afghanistan with direct access to European markets, reducing dependency on traditional routes through Pakistan.

Chabahar Port Agreement. Afghanistan has collaborated with Iran and India to utilize Chabahar Port as an alternative trade route, bypassing Pakistan. This agreement is part of Afghanistan's strategy to diversify its trade routes and enhance access to global markets.

Afghanistan's strategic priorities revolve around reducing economic isolation, improving infrastructure, and fostering partnerships with neighboring countries to boost trade and transit opportunities.

6.1 Pakistan

Pakistan's strategic location makes it a key player in regional connectivity. Its policies and initiatives reflect a focus on leveraging its geographic position to enhance trade and economic integration.

Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA). Signed in 2010, this agreement facilitates the movement of goods between Afghanistan and Pakistan, providing Afghanistan with access to Pakistani ports for international trade. However, political tensions and logistical challenges have limited its full potential.

China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). While primarily a bilateral project with China, CPEC has regional implications. It aims to connect Gwadar Port in Pakistan to

China's western regions, offering potential trade and transit benefits for Afghanistan and Central Asia [16].

Pakistan's strategic priorities include strengthening its role as a transit hub, improving infrastructure, and fostering economic ties with neighboring countries, despite ongoing political and security challenges.

6.2 Iran

Iran has actively pursued regional integration through infrastructure development and multilateral agreements. Its strategic priorities focus on enhancing connectivity and trade with Central Asia and South Asia.

Ashgabat Agreement. Iran is a key participant in this multimodal transport agreement, which aims to create an international transit corridor connecting Central Asia to the Persian Gulf. This agreement underscores Iran's commitment to facilitating regional trade.

Chabahar Port Development. Iran's collaboration with India and Afghanistan to develop Chabahar Port is a cornerstone of its regional strategy. The port serves as a gateway for Afghanistan to access international markets, bypassing Pakistan, and strengthens Iran's position as a regional trade hub.

Iran's policies emphasize reducing economic isolation, improving transit infrastructure, and fostering partnerships with neighboring countries to enhance regional trade and connectivity.

6.3 Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has emerged as an active participant in regional integration efforts, particularly in Central Asia. Its strategic priorities include improving transport links and fostering economic cooperation.

Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan Railway Project. This initiative aims to establish a direct railway link connecting Uzbekistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan. It is a key component of Uzbekistan's strategy to enhance regional trade and connectivity.

Participation in the Ashgabat Agreement. Uzbekistan's involvement in this agreement highlights its commitment to developing international transport corridors that facilitate trade between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.

Uzbekistan's policies reflect a focus on transforming the country into a regional transit hub, improving infrastructure, and strengthening economic ties with Afghanistan and South Asia.

6.4 Multilateral Initiatives

Several multilateral frameworks support regional economic integration involving Afghanistan and its neighbors.

Economic Cooperation Organization Trade Agreement (ECOTA). This preferential trade agreement among ECO member states, including Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan, aims to establish a free trade area by 2025. It focuses on reducing trade barriers and enhancing economic cooperation.

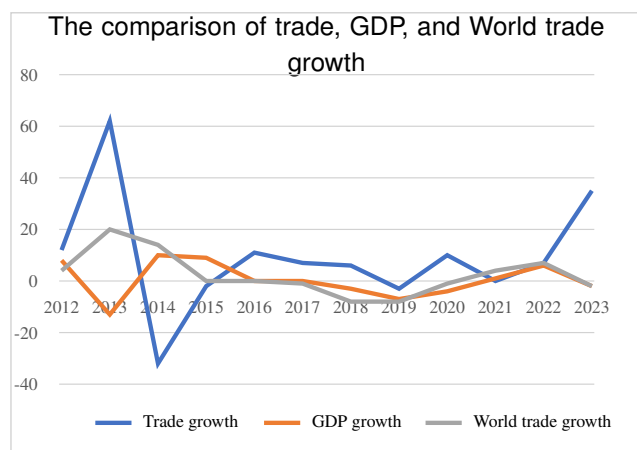


Figure 1. The comparison of trade, GDP, and world trade growth. Source: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/AFG>.

6.5 Economic Welfare of Afghanistan

Figure 1 supports the following observations concerning Afghanistan's trade and economic trends.

Trade Growth Volatility. Afghanistan's trade growth (blue line) shows significant volatility, with sharp spikes and drops. This suggests that Afghanistan's trade is highly unstable, likely influenced by political instability, security challenges, or external economic shocks.

GDP Growth Stability. GDP growth (orange line) appears more stable compared with trade growth but remains relatively low. This indicates that Afghanistan's economic performance is more predictable than trade but still lacks significant upward momentum.

Alignment with Global Trends. World trade growth (gray line) is relatively stable and follows a smoother trend, while Afghanistan's trade growth diverges significantly. This suggests that Afghanistan's trade performance is driven more by domestic factors than by global economic trends.

Post-2020 Trends. After 2020, all three indicators—trade growth, GDP growth, and world trade growth—show a slight increase, which might indicate some recovery after the pandemic or geopolitical changes.

The implications for Afghanistan include a need for trade stability, as the extreme fluctuations highlight the need for a more diversified and stable trade policy to reduce economic shocks. Afghanistan's economy might also benefit from stronger regional economic ties, including through Uzbekistan and other neighboring countries. Despite some improvements in trade, GDP growth remains moderate, indicating that trade alone is not enough to drive sustainable economic growth.

7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Afghanistan's regional economic integration is significantly hindered by ongoing political instability and security threats. The persistent conflicts involving the Taliban, internal factions, and external influences create an unpredictable business environment, deterring investment and trade. Security risks along trade routes further exacerbate the challenges, as frequent attacks on supply chains increase the cost of doing

business.

Regional dynamics also play a crucial role in Afghanistan's economic prospects. Pakistan and Iran, as Afghanistan's primary trading partners, influence the country's economic stability. Pakistan's control over transit routes, especially through the Karachi and Gwadar ports, creates dependency, while periodic border closures disrupt trade. Iran, on the other hand, provides an alternative route via Chabahar Port but faces international sanctions that limit its economic outreach. Moreover, geopolitical tensions between these nations and their engagement in Afghanistan's internal affairs add another layer of complexity to regional trade and cooperation.

7.1 Infrastructure and Connectivity Barriers

A major obstacle to Afghanistan's integration into regional economies is its inadequate infrastructure. The country lacks efficient transportation networks, which results in delays and increased costs for imports and exports. Key trade corridors, such as the Lapis Lazuli Route and the Chabahar corridor, remain underdeveloped or underutilized due to security threats and logistical inefficiencies. The railway network, though growing, still fails to offer a seamless regional link, restricting Afghanistan's access to Central Asian and South Asian markets.

Energy shortages further weaken Afghanistan's economic potential. Limited access to reliable electricity hinders industrial growth and foreign investment. Dependence on energy imports from neighboring countries, including Uzbekistan, highlights the necessity for improved regional energy cooperation.

Limited regional connectivity exacerbates these infrastructure gaps. Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan for maritime access through the Karachi and Gwadar ports leaves it vulnerable to political tensions. Efforts to diversify trade routes via Iran, China, and Central Asia face challenges due to diplomatic constraints, sanctions, and technical inefficiencies. This lack of multiple secure trade routes continues to limit Afghanistan's integration into broader regional economic frameworks.

7.2 Economic and Institutional Challenges

Afghanistan faces significant economic and institutional hurdles that impede regional economic integration. The country's weak financial systems limit its ability to attract foreign investment and access regional financial markets. Restrictions on banking transactions, currency instability, and the lack of a well-regulated financial sector deter external investors.

Institutional weaknesses, such as corruption and governance deficiencies, further undermine economic stability. Weak regulatory frameworks discourage formal trade, pushing businesses toward informal and illicit trade channels. These institutional inefficiencies lead to high transaction costs, unpredictability in contract enforcement, and difficulties in regional trade negotiations. Addressing these issues requires structural reforms and international cooperation to build financial credibility and institutional trust.

7.3 Comparative Analysis

Afghanistan's challenges in regional economic integration mirror those faced by other landlocked countries such as

Nepal, Mongolia, and Central Asian states. These nations have overcome similar issues by developing robust transport infrastructure, diversifying trade routes, and enhancing regional cooperation. Unlike Mongolia, which benefits from trade partnerships with China and Russia, Afghanistan struggles with geopolitical tensions that limit its options. Similarly, while Central Asian nations leverage the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for trade expansion, Afghanistan lacks equivalent institutional support.

Regional organizations such as ECO and SCO could play a role in Afghanistan's economic integration. These organizations promote trade facilitation and infrastructure development, but Afghanistan's unstable political environment limits its ability to fully benefit from their initiatives. Strengthening Afghanistan's engagement with these organizations through diplomatic and economic reforms could enhance its integration prospects.

7.4 Role of Regional Cooperation

Regional partnerships are crucial for Afghanistan's economic stability. Countries such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, China, and Iran can contribute to addressing Afghanistan's economic and infrastructure challenges. Enhancing trade agreements, facilitating customs procedures, and investing in joint infrastructure projects would support regional economic integration.

Investments in transportation infrastructure, such as railway expansions linking Afghanistan with Central Asia and South Asia, could reduce trade barriers. For instance, Uzbekistan's initiatives, including the Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif railway project, offer a promising alternative to Pakistan-centric trade routes. Similarly, developing energy corridors with Central Asia, including electricity imports from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, could alleviate Afghanistan's energy shortages.

Multilateral trade agreements, such as preferential trade deals with neighboring countries, could provide Afghanistan with greater market access. Establishing special economic zones (SEZs) and industrial clusters near border areas may also attract foreign direct investment and create employment opportunities.

7.5 Challenges and Opportunities for Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan plays a strategic role in Afghanistan's regional economic integration, leveraging its position as a key trade and energy partner. Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy efforts, such as hosting regional trade forums and negotiating transit agreements, highlight its commitment to fostering economic cooperation. Infrastructure projects such as the Mazar-i-Sharif railway extension further strengthen connectivity between the two nations.

However, Uzbekistan faces challenges in facilitating Afghanistan's integration. Security concerns, particularly regarding border stability and Taliban governance, create uncertainties for investment and trade. Additionally, Uzbekistan's economic capacity has limitations in fully supporting Afghanistan's infrastructure needs. Balancing security considerations with economic engagement remains a key challenge for Uzbekistan's role in Afghanistan's regional economic integration.

8. CONCLUSION

Afghanistan's path to economic integration is a story of both struggle and potential. For years, the country has been held back by political turmoil, crumbling infrastructure, and weak institutions, leaving it cut off from the trade and investment opportunities that could drive its growth. Yet, despite these challenges, there is a sense of hope. By working with its neighbors, Afghanistan has a chance to break free from economic isolation and step onto the global stage.

The road ahead is not easy. Security remains a major concern; without stability, progress is difficult. Infrastructure, from roads to railways, is in desperate need of repair and expansion. In addition, the financial system, plagued by inefficiency and corruption, needs serious reform. However, these challenges also present opportunities. Partnerships with countries such as Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Iran, and China could open new trade routes, create jobs, and bring much-needed investment. Picture a future where Afghan goods flow freely across borders, where energy projects light up homes, and where modern railways connect communities. These are not just ideas; they are possibilities within reach.

To make this vision a reality, Afghanistan must focus on building trust both at home and abroad. Diplomatic efforts with neighboring countries can pave the way for stronger ties, while clearer trade policies and governance reforms can attract foreign investors. A transparent and reliable financial system will be key to fostering confidence and ensuring that growth benefits everyone. These changes will take time, but they are essential for creating a stable and prosperous economy.

At its core, Afghanistan's future depends on its ability to connect not just geographically, but economically and politically. Its location, at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, is a strategic advantage that could transform it into a hub for regional trade. Nevertheless, this transformation will require more than just Afghan efforts. It will take the support of regional partners and the international community to build a foundation for lasting stability and growth.

This is not just about numbers or policies—it is about people. It is about the small business owner who can finally access new markets, the farmer who can transport goods without fear, and the young person who sees a future full of opportunity. By embracing regional cooperation and investing in its potential, Afghanistan can move from isolation to integration, from hardship to hope. The journey will not be quick or easy, but with determination and collaboration, a brighter future is possible.

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