REVIEW

of the official reviewer for the dissertation work of Bilal Naqeeb Jan

on the theme «Unlocking Afghanistan's Role in Regional Connectivity: Key Challenges and Prospects»,

presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the specialty 8D03105 – «International Relations»

Al-Farabi Kazakh National University — Department of International Relations and World Economy

№	Criteria	Eligibility (one of the options must be checked)	Justification of the position of the official reviewer
1.	The topic of the thesis (as of the date of its approval) corresponds to the directions of development of science and/or state programs	**1.1 Compliance with priority areas of science development or government programs:** ☐ Completed within a project or target programme financed from the state budget ☐ Completed within another state programme ☒ **Corresponds to a priority direction of the development of science approved by the Higher Scientific and Technical Commission under the Government of the RK**	The thesis corresponds to the priority direction "Scientific foundations of «Mängilik El»: fundamental and applied research in the social sciences and humanities". No state-budget project funding is declared in the text. The topic is directly aligned with the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030 (diversification of transit access to the Indian Ocean, calibrated engagement with Afghanistan) and with the connectivity agenda of CAREC and UNECE, in which Kazakhstan participates.
2.	Importance for science	☒ **The work makes a significant contribution to science, and its importance is well disclosed** ☐ The work does not make a significant contribution / importance is not disclosed	The thesis explains a genuine anomaly: the consolidation of territorial control after August 2021 removed the constraint most often invoked before 2021 without unblocking a single major project. This is converted into a research problem rather than a rhetorical observation. The contribution is the geopolitical lock-and-key model, which integrates dimensions (corridors, sanctions, Taliban governance, great-power rivalry) that the literature has treated separately, and translates them into observable indicators with stated falsification conditions.
3.	The principle of independence	☒ **High** ☐ Medium ☐ Low ☐ No independence	The analytical model, the concepts of the sovereign gatekeeper and managed dissociation, the Geopolitical Rivalry Matrix and the indicator scheme are the author's own formulations. Original data were generated by the applicant: 8 semi-structured elite interviews and a 14-respondent expert survey. The argumentation is the author's throughout; borrowed positions are attributed and critically assessed rather than reproduced.
4.	The principle of inner unity	**4.1 Justification of the relevance:** ☒ **Justified** ☐ Partially justified ☐ Not justified **4.2 The content reflects the topic:** ☒ **Reflects** ☐ Partially reflects ☐ Does not reflect	4.1 Relevance is substantiated at three levels: empirical (post-2021 configuration), regional (transit interests of Central Asia, incl. Kazakhstan) and theoretical (explanatory deficit of functionalist accounts). 4.2–4.3 Object, subject, aim, seven objectives and seven provisions for defence are mutually consistent. The Conclusion maps each objective onto the result obtained — a methodologically sound solution that makes the claimed achievements verifiable. 4.4 Chapter architecture follows the title: theory → actors → cases → prospects. Cross-references between chapters are explicit; the transition section 3.2 justifies the move from corridor-level to project-level analysis.

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5.	Scientific novelty principle	**5.1 Are the scientific results and provisions new?** ☐ Completely new ☒ **Partially new (25–75%)** ☐ Not new (less than 25%) **5.2 Are the dissertation findings new?** ☐ Completely new ☒ **Partially new (25–75%)** ☐ Not new (less than 25%) **5.3 Managerial / policy decisions are new and reasoned:** ☐ Completely new ☒ **Partially new (25–75%)** ☐ Not new (less than 25%)	5.1 Novelty is real and located in the text, and sits at the upper end of the 25–75% band. New as an integrated, testable configuration: the structural lock, actor-specific keys, the sovereign gatekeeper and managed dissociation, each operationalized through L-, K- and G-indicators. The constituent building blocks (relative gains, weaponized interdependence, de facto sovereignty) are drawn from existing literature. 5.2 The most substantive finding is managed dissociation as a stable, intentionally maintained equilibrium rather than a transitional stage — an analytically independent position, not a relabelling. The demonstration that the same mechanism operates across a transport corridor and an extractive project is also new. 5.3 Policy recommendations are differentiated by actor and tied to instruments each actor actually controls. The Kazakhstan section (institutional rather than financial leadership; a common regional compliance and documentation standard through CAREC/UNECE/SCO) is new in its formulation; the underlying instruments are known.
6.	The validity of the main findings	☒ **All main conclusions are well-grounded (for qualitative research and the humanities)** ☐ The main conclusions are not sufficiently grounded	Validity is secured by a falsifiable hypothesis with three testable corollaries, by process-tracing with causal process observations, by triangulation across documentary, interview and survey streams, and by the explicit refusal to give weight to a claim resting on a single stream. One reservation, stated in item 11: the definition of the lock contains a criterion of intent ("deliberately suppressed"), whereas the evidence presented mainly documents effects. This calls for a reformulation, not for rejection of the finding.
7.	The main provisions for the defence (7.1 proven; 7.2 trivial; 7.3 new; 7.4 application level; 7.5 proven in the article)	*Assessed separately for each of the seven provisions — see the adjacent column.* Codes: 7.1 — proven / rather proven / rather not proven; 7.2 — trivial yes/no; 7.3 — new yes/no; 7.4 — narrow/medium/wide; 7.5 — yes/no.	P1 (deadlock explained by a geopolitical lock): 7.1 proven; 7.2 no; 7.3 yes; 7.4 wide; 7.5 yes. P2 (lock-and-key model as a framework for contested sovereignties): 7.1 proven; 7.2 no; 7.3 yes; 7.4 wide; 7.5 yes. P3 (Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as sovereign gatekeeper with bounded agency): 7.1 proven; 7.2 no; 7.3 yes; 7.4 medium; 7.5 yes.

			P4 (managed dissociation as the most likely equilibrium): 7.1 rather proven — the equilibrium is demonstrated for 2021–2026, its stability beyond that horizon is inferred; 7.2 no; 7.3 yes; 7.4 medium; 7.5 yes. P5 (UAP and Mes Aynak as two faces of one lock): 7.1 proven; 7.2 no; 7.3 yes; 7.4 narrow; 7.5 no. P6 (relative-gains and regime-survival logics override absolute gains): 7.1 proven; 7.2 no; 7.3 yes, as applied to the Afghan case; 7.4 medium; 7.5 yes. P7 (the multi-method design and the Matrix as a replicable approach): 7.1 rather not proven; 7.2 yes — the statement describes a property of the instrument, not a research result; 7.3 no; 7.4 medium; 7.5 no. The author himself qualifies external validity beyond Afghanistan as a task for further research. Recommendation: withdraw P7 or reformulate it as a substantive claim.
8.	The principle of reliability. Reliability of sources and information provided	**8.1 Choice of methodology justified / described in sufficient detail:** **☒ Yes** ☐ No **8.2 Modern research methods and data processing used:** **☒ Yes** ☐ No **8.3 Theoretical conclusions confirmed by empirical research:** **☒ Yes** ☐ No **8.4 Important statements confirmed by references to current and reliable literature:** ☐ Confirmed **☒ Partially confirmed** ☐ Not confirmed **8.5 Literature sources for the review:** **☒ Sufficient** ☐ Not sufficient	8.1 Case selection is justified by analytical leverage: UAP as a most-likely case for functionalist expectations, Mes Aynak as a critical case for agency within structure. This is methodologically correct for comparative case research. 8.2 Process-tracing, content and discourse analysis of official texts, coding into the Geopolitical Rivalry Matrix, triangulation. The design is appropriate; no computer-assisted qualitative analysis or quantitative processing is used, which is consistent with the declared refusal of statistical generalization. 8.3 Within a qualitative design, the corollaries are tested against the empirical record of both cases and against supplementary corridors (CASA-1000, TAPI, Lapis Lazuli, Qosh Tepa). 8.4 Partially confirmed. Verification revealed some mis-attribution of references affecting load-bearing statements; see item 11, remark 3. Continuous verification of in-text citations against the bibliography is required. 8.5 459 items, six declared groups, incl. OFAC materials, World Bank, ADB/CAREC, UNECE and UNAMA documents. Sufficient in volume.
9.	Practical value principle	**9.1 The thesis has theoretical value:** **☒ Yes** ☐ No **9.2 The thesis is of practical importance and results are likely to be applied:** **☒ Yes** ☐ No **9.3 Are the practical suggestions new?** ☐ Completely new	9.1 Theoretical value lies in specifying the scope conditions of liberal functionalism (mis-specification rather than refutation) and in operationalizing the gatekeeper concept for non-recognized, sanctioned regimes; portable to de facto and partially recognized entities. 9.2 Section 4.3 is among the strongest parts of the thesis. For Kazakhstan the author distinguishes the political space Astana does possess from the financial key it does not, and derives institutional rather than financial leadership. The collective-action finding that reversibility of commitments is individually rational for each regional state and reproduces the deadlock for all of them is non-trivial and practically significant.

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10.	The quality of writing and design	☒ **High** ☐ Average ☐ Below average ☐ Low	Academic writing is mature: chapters are connected by explicit transitions, each section is tied to a stated objective and corollary, and argumentation is cumulative rather than enumerative. The assessment refers to argumentation and language. Technical and editorial defects are removable and do not affect the substance.
11.	Notes on a thesis	*Ordered by significance. Remarks 3–9 are clarifying, source-critical and editorial; they do not overturn the main results. Remark 2 should be resolved before the defence.*	1. Intentionality of the lock. The lock is defined through deliberate suppression, yet the evidence documents effects rather than intent: the author himself notes that Washington rarely opposes UAP publicly and characterises the US position as indirect denial, and bank behaviour as over-compliance. An unintended chilling effect of a counter-terrorism sanctions regime is functionally equivalent to deliberate blocking but theoretically distinct. Either weaken the definition to functional equivalence of outcome, or present direct evidence of intent. 2. Profile of the source base and inflated source status. Only 23 of 459 entries carry a DOI; The Diplomat, Times of Central Asia, CACI Analyst, Modern Diplomacy, Eurasia Review and news portals predominate. For claims on sanctions architecture and de-risking, OFAC general licences and guidance, FATF reports and UNSCR 2615 (2021) should carry more weight. Entry [451] is formatted as a document of the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum but is in fact an AtlasPress news item, which is inadmissible under the declared six-group source classification. 3. An alternative explanation not fully eliminated at Mes Aynak. The text asserts that commercial constraints have eased, but records only the reopening of royalty talks (MCC seeking a reduction from 19.5% to about 9.5%) without a concluded agreement, and leaves the investor's power-plant, smelter and railway obligations unresolved. The elimination logic ("constraints specific to alternatives ease while the outcome persists") requires demonstrated easing; for the commercial factor this condition is not met.
12.	Scientific level of the doctoral student's articles on the topic of research	*Assessment of the publication record.*	Five publications are listed: Kazakhstan-Spectrum (2026); International Relations & International Law Journal (2024); Public Administration and Civil Service (2024); Frontiers in Political Science (2026); Discover Global Society (2026). The last two are in internationally indexed peer-reviewed journals; the first three are in national peer-reviewed journals. Content-wise the articles cover the theoretical and empirical dimensions of the thesis; Afghan–Uzbek relations after 2021, political change and the Belt and Road Initiative, competing governance models, and Kazakhstan's pragmatic non-recognition and correspond to provisions P1–P4 and P6. The scientific level is adequate to the requirements for a PhD thesis. Reservations: the thesis does not state the indexation, CiteScore percentile or quartile of the journals, membership of the Committee for Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education list, or presentation at international conferences; four of the five articles are co-authored, including with the scientific consultants, and the applicant's personal contribution is not specified.

13.	Decision of the official reviewer (pursuant to paragraph 28 of the Model Regulations)	☒ **To award the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)** ☐ To send the thesis for revision ☐ To refuse to award the degree	The thesis is a completed, independent scientific qualification work solving a topical scientific task, explaining the persistent divergence between Afghanistan's geographic position and its functional role in Central Asia–South Asia connectivity. It meets the requirements for PhD theses in respect of relevance, inner unity, scientific novelty, validity and reliability of results, and theoretical and practical significance. The remarks concern accuracy of citation, completeness of the theoretical apparatus, the profile of the source base, the justification of thresholds and technical presentation; none of them overturns the main conclusions or calls into question the independence and scientific value of the research. Decision: to award Bilal Naqeeb Jan the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the educational programme 8D03105 – International Relations.

In reviews, official reviewers indicate one of the following solutions: 1) to award the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or Doctor of Specialization; 2) to send the thesis for revision (except for cases of thesis defence in the form of a series of articles); 3) to refuse to award the degree.

Copies of the reviews of the official reviewers are handed over to the doctoral student no later than 5 (five) working days before the defence of the thesis.

Official Reviewer:

Almaty Management University, Associate Professor _____ Azhar Serikkaliyeva
(place of work, academic title) (signature) (full name)

«2» september 2026_