Review

by Dr. L.F. Delovarova, PhD in International Relations, Acting Professor, of Bilal Naqib Jan's dissertation, entitled "Unlocking Afghanistan's Role in Regional Connectivity: Key Challenges and Prospects" for the PhD degree on educational program "8D03105 – International Relations"

The relevance of the topic "Unlocking Afghanistan's Role in Regional Connectivity: Key Challenges and Prospects" stems from the growing importance of Afghanistan as a strategic link between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East amid the transformation and changing realities of contemporary international relations.

From the perspective of international relations, the study of Afghanistan's potential for transport connectivity contributes to understanding how geopolitical competition, regional cooperation, and non-recognition policies shape transnational integration. For Central Asian countries, initiatives to develop transport infrastructure through Afghanistan directly influence trade diversification, transport security, and access to developing markets beyond the region.

For Kazakhstan, which seeks to strengthen its role as a middle power and regional logistics hub, stable transport corridors through Afghanistan can expand economic opportunities, reinforce regional resilience, and support its broader strategy of promoting transport connectivity and sustainable development across Eurasia. Another important aspect is the insufficient study of Afghanistan's role in Central Asia, its positioning, and its long-term prospects for cooperation in terms of connectivity.

The choice of topic was agreed upon with the foreign scientific supervisor, Professor Srikanth Kondapalli, as was the structure of the research presented. This dissertation has both theoretical and practical significance.

The scientific novelty of this dissertation lies in the development of an original theoretical explanation for the protracted impasse in Afghanistan's transport connectivity and its empirical verification through comparative case studies. The dissertation consistently develops this contribution from theory to empirical analysis and policy conclusions.

First, the dissertation develops a geopolitical "lock-and-key" model as an original analytical framework to explain why Afghanistan's geographic centrality has not translated into regional connectivity. Unlike existing approaches, which attribute corridor failures primarily to instability, weak governance, or economic constraints, this model demonstrates that connectivity is constrained by the interplay of great-power rivalries, regional geopolitical competition, sanctions regimes, and the Taliban's sovereign gatekeeper negotiating strategies.

Second, the dissertation presents and operationalizes a new conceptual framework consisting of the interrelated concepts of geopolitical lock, sovereign gatekeepers, political and security keys, managed decoupling, and unlocking connectivity. These concepts are transformed into empirically observable variables and integrated into a unified analytical model, providing a systematic mechanism for explaining infrastructure impasses in a tense geopolitical environment. Third, building on this theoretical framework, the dissertation develops a "geopolitical rivalry matrix" that identifies key players, their strategic objectives, instruments of influence, sought-after political "keys," and observed patterns of interaction. This matrix serves as an original methodological tool, linking theoretical assumptions with empirical analysis and enabling a systematic comparison of transport infrastructure development projects.

Fourth, the dissertation empirically validates the proposed model through a comparative analysis of two strategically important cases the Uzbekistan - Afghanistan - Pakistan (UAP)

railway and the Mes Aynak copper smelter project. Although these cases represent different sectors of regional transport infrastructure, they reveal common causal mechanisms through which competing geopolitical interests hinder the creation of integrated regional corridors despite objectively favorable economic and geographic conditions.

Fifth, the study demonstrates that the explanatory power of the "lock-and-key" geopolitical model exceeds that of liberal functionalism and complex interdependence in the Afghan context. The results show that regional actors consistently prioritize relative geopolitical gains over collective economic benefits, thereby creating a stable equilibrium of strategic blockades rather than functional integration.

Sixth, the dissertation advances the concept of managed dissociation as a new theoretical explanation for the trajectory of connectivity in Afghanistan after 2021. Rather than moving toward full regional integration or complete isolation, Afghanistan increasingly faces fragmented, bilateral, and sectoral connectivity arrangements that coexist with ongoing geopolitical competition. This concept represents the main theoretical outcome of empirical analysis.

Seventh, the dissertation strengthens the empirical foundation of connectivity research in Afghanistan by integrating comparative case studies, process tracing, document analysis, in-depth interviews, and expert surveys within a unified analytical framework. This methodological approach allows for systematic testing of the proposed theoretical model based on multiple data sources.

Based on theoretical and empirical findings, the dissertation offers a revised understanding of regional connectivity policy. It demonstrates that sustainable transport connectivity in and around Afghanistan cannot be achieved solely through infrastructure investment or economic incentives but requires a negotiated political environment between competing external actors and the regional regulator. This provides a new analytical perspective for assessing future transport connectivity initiatives in Afghanistan and adjacent regions.

The aim and objectives of the dissertation are formulated in accordance with the stated research topic, and its object and subject are clearly defined, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the problems posed and addressed by the author. The dissertation is logically structured, aligned with its aim and objectives, and includes an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, and a list of references. The chronological framework of the study is justified and fits succinctly within the scope of the declared research.

The candidate has successfully accomplished the stated research objectives, and the work has both scientific and practical value. The theoretical significance of the dissertation stems from the need to develop new approaches and helps fill gaps in understanding Afghanistan's problems in the current international context. The practical significance of the study lies in the fact that its content and conclusions can be used to develop curriculum on geopolitics, international relations, world politics, and regional studies.

The findings and recommendations of the dissertation can be offered to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, analytical institutions studying cooperation between Kazakhstan and the Central Asian countries with Afghanistan, and, more broadly, with the Middle East and South Asia. The main propositions and conclusions of the dissertation are presented in five articles published in domestic and international journals, three of which appear in journals recommended by the Committee for Control over Education and Science of the Ministry of Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and two in foreign journals indexed in the Scopus and Web of Science databases. The results were discussed at a scientific

seminar held by the Department of International Relations and World Economy at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University.

It should be noted that the candidate maintained regular contact with his scientific advisors and completed a research internship in Afghanistan, during which he conducted fieldwork and elite interviews. Throughout his studies, he actively participated in faculty and university events to present and test his research results.

Bilal Naqeeb Jan's dissertation, "Unlocking Afghanistan's Role in Regional Connectivity: Key Challenges and Prospects," is an independent, logically structured, and scientifically rigorous work with well-developed research tools and well-reasoned conclusions. Its scientific novelty and relevance are beyond doubt and fully meet the qualification requirements of the specialty passport of the educational program "8D03105 – International Relations." The dissertation is eligible for defense before the dissertation council in its field.

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