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## Challenges of the New Silk Route Initiative (NSRI) for Afghanistan

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### Abstract

This paper argues that, to end the fourteen-year conflict in Afghanistan, the United States came out with a novel idea under the banner of a “New Silk Route Initiative” for conflict resolution and the empowerment of Afghanistan. The purpose of this program was to better integrate Afghanistan with South and Central Asia after 2014 by reinforcing the Ancient Silk Route, first known as the ‘Asia roundabout’ or the ‘bridge between South and Central Asia’. However, this paper asserts that the initiative for Silk Road revival is hard to realize, due to inextricable political, security, and technical challenges. The paper is an attempt to highlight all of these challenges which have contributed to the project’s slow progress. The authors further suggest that these challenges are not unique to the New Silk Route Initiative, but rather are common across all initiatives and development projects which aim to integrate Afghanistan with the rest of the world.

### Background

The United States (US) and its Western allies earnestly desire to empower war-ridden Afghanistan to achieve economic sustainability and lasting peace. International actors believe that this can be achieved through integration with Central and South Asia, for wider access to regional trade and transportation. They also realize that Afghanistan has the tremendous potential to re-emerge as the “land bridge” between Kazakhstan, the Indian Ocean and the Greater Asia region (Santhanam, 2010; Thaler, 2008).

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Accordingly, a New Silk Route Initiative (hereafter, NSRI) <sup>1</sup> as announced by the US in 2011, symbolizes the concept of ‘regionalization’ and ‘intra-governmentalism.’ The end goals of this initiative are: to promote more efficient land-based transit and trade at the regional level; to build an Afghan rail system that is connected with bordering countries across the region; to explore Afghanistan’s potential as an energy corridor for Turkmen oil and gas to Pakistan, India and Tajik; to provide access of Kyrgyz and Uzbek electricity to Pakistan; (Muzalevsky, 2011) and to allow free trade and transportation along the national borders. Hypothetically, its essence is to open up new markets and economic opportunities for the landlocked countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan (Castelli and Scacciavillani, 2012), thereby boosting their economic growth, creating new jobs, attracting foreign investment, reducing poverty, ensuring regional stability, and promoting democratic values in the region as a whole (Sachdeva, 2015). In doing so, the Greater Central and South Asian region would emerge as a commercially viable and politically stable setting for continued economic development.

Thus, the NSRI is focused on the following:

- Free trade, traffic and transportation for and over Afghanistan;
- Sustained cooperation among the South and Central Asian states;
- Soft national borders;
- Liberalized tax policy;
- Free flow of foreign investment for equitable resource sharing;
- Free trade, traffic and transportation

With these objectives in mind, the NSRI was perceived to bring stability to Afghanistan by means of regional and economic integration with South and Central Asia. The project has not yet been realized due to challenges which are discussed below. These challenges are so deeply entrenched that they blocked the coalition strategy in Afghanistan. The lack of success in completing the NSRI has implied that the theory of economic and regional integration in Afghanistan is impossible without political stability.

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<sup>1</sup> The signatories of the NSRI are India, Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, and other South and Central Asian Countries.

## Methodology

To plug the gaps in the available literature,<sup>2</sup> the investigator followed an inter-disciplinary and multidisciplinary approach for research in social sciences. Background research embodies historical and contemporary studies, as well as primary reports of international funding agencies, such as: the IMF, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. These reports were studied to better understand the challenges of various intra-regional and trans-border trade relevant to Afghanistan. These include reports from the conferences held on Afghanistan, which were held in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Germany and France, among others. When supplemented by official reports and diplomatic statements from the partner countries in Afghanistan, data was reinforced by information available on various print and electronic media engines. Research was additionally enriched by responses from diverse respondents on the NSRI across varied topics.

Further to the above, brief interviews were conducted in 2014, 2015 and 2016 respectively, and inputs were gathered from the diplomats of the Embassies of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Russia and the USA in New Delhi. Discussions were held with Mrs Samira Javadi (*Political Analyst, Embassy of Afghanistan*), Mr Merwais Nazari (*Economic Advisor, Embassy of Afghanistan*), Mr Said Raufie (*Conference Organizer, Embassy of Afghanistan*), an unnamed government official, acting as the (*Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan*<sup>3</sup>) and other officials of the Pakistan Embassy. Similar discussions were held with the officials of the US Embassy in New Delhi and with the Ministry of External Affairs (*Afghan Division*), Government of India, New Delhi. Responses were gathered from former diplomats, political analysts and subject experts from the IDSA (*Institute of Defence and Strategic Analysis*) New Delhi; Centre of Inner Asia, Centre of Russian and Central Asian

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<sup>2</sup> Since the announcement of the project, literature has appeared/is appearing on the New Silk Initiative across the globe. Research institutes in USA, specifically *Jamestown Federation Washington DC* and *Rethink Institute Washington DC*, as well as prominent writers have done painstaking research, to include the works of: Frederick Starr (2009). *The New Silk Roads: Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia*, Joshua Kucera (2011); *Russia, U.S Withdrawal From Afghanistan and the "New Silk Road,"* Joshua Kucera (2011); *Clinton's Dubious Plan to Save Afghanistan With a 'New Silk Road'.* Vladimir Fedorenko (2013); *The New Silk Road initiatives In Central Asia.* Sebastien Peyrouse & Gael Raballand (2015); *Central Asia: the New Silk Road Initiative's questionable economic rationality,* Thomas Zimmerman (2015); and *The New Silk Roads: China, the U.S., and the Future of Central Asia.* However, such works are at the formative stage and do not appreciate the initiative in terms of costs and benefits together.

<sup>3</sup> Identities are kept confidential as agreed during research, due to State security interests.

Studies at the School of International Studies (*SIS*) at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, as well as the South Asian Centre at University of Delhi and Peace Studies Centre at Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi. The inputs of Prof. Ajay K. Patnaik, Prof. Gulshan Dietl, Prof. Mondira Dutta, Prof. Gulshan Sachdeva, Prof. Happymoan Jacob, Prof. Sanjay Pandey, Prof. P L Dash, Prof. S Deshpandey, and Dr. Dhananjay Tripathi in general, and that of Ashok Sajjanhar, former Indian diplomat in Kazakhstan, in particular proved useful for shaping the study on the NSRI to include challenges and opportunities such as international saliency and economies of scale. Last—but not the least, similar impressions were sought from the common Afghans, Pakistanis, and Americans living as expats within New Delhi, as well as the Afghan and SAARC students at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and at the University of Kashmir Srinagar.

## **1. Background**

### **1.1. The NSRI scepticism**

Many analysts doubt the range of possible outcomes for the NSRI. One Central Asian expert, George Gavrillis, considers this a promising but unachievable proposal, due to a lack of commitment among countries in the region (Kucera, 2016). Journalist Joshua Foust also calls it a “great idea that needs a heavy dose of realism” (Foust, 2011). Andrew Kuchins notes that the New Silk Route is more of a guiding vision than a clear strategy, since it lacks adequate analysis to guide its development and implementation (Kuchins, 2011). Investors and political figures are skeptic about the proposed trade route for its lack of clarity, and to what extent this proposal is aligned with US, Afghan, or regional interests (Dietl, 2015). The NSRI is not the only regional integration project for South and Central Asia which involves Afghanistan. China, has planned (2013) and even executed (2016) its land-based China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project (Friedberg, 2011; Maini, 2012).

Russia suspects that the US has an underlying motive in pursuing the NSRI. Consequentially, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which Russia is a key member, has been critical of the NSRI. Competition between the two development projects is evident across several of the key SCO resolutions, which overlap the US-backed ‘New Silk Route Concept’ (The Hindu, 2012). Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin supported that Moscow, instead of the NSRI, would contribute \$500 million to the CASA-1000 for hydropower transmission from Tajikistan

and Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan and Pakistan (Kucera, 2011). He also endorsed the idea of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline project, although both the TAPI and the NSRI projects are complementary to each other (Maini, 2012). Even Pakistan’s political mainstream was suspicious of the idea for being an ‘American construct’ (Fayaz, 2015; Kaw, 2016). Apart from generalized pessimism, the NSRI seems impracticable for a variety of reasons, to include: unending war in Afghanistan; nation-state rivalry on ethno-ideological, ethno-economic and ethno-cultural grounds; and a faltering Afghan economy.

## **1.2. Continued conflict in Afghanistan**

The international Peace-making community hoped that the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan would eliminate the Taliban and restore peace in Afghanistan. However, this rhetoric fell apart for various reasons, including the Taliban’s resilience and their external support. Consequently, Afghanistan—as the heartland of the NSRI, remains fragile due to the unending conflict between the Taliban and residual US forces. The conflict grew more complicated after many foreign forces withdrew in late 2014 due to a weak mandate. The Afghan forces, despite great effort, were unable to restrain the Taliban from escalated violence. The growing Afghan forces’ human loss, in combination with the Taliban’s acquisition of new territories in the north and north east, indicates an overall decrease of Afghan control over state security. The present task of the US armed forces is only to assist the Afghan forces in training and capacity building exercises, rather than to fight directly against the Taliban, as was the case before 2014 (Rath, 2013). The Taliban’s sprawling influence should not imply that the group will control Afghanistan in the long term. Many analysts foresaw the country descending into civil conflict following third-party troop withdrawal in 2014 (Devine and Kassel, 2013). Leading academics Jack Devine and Whitney Kassel wrote, “The withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014 is likely to be followed by a civil war between a predominantly non-Pashtun security apparatus and Pakistan-backed Taliban forces” (Patnaik, Dietl, and Sachdeva, 2015).

However, several scholars rule out the possibility of a civil war in post-2014 Afghanistan. With long-term financial interests, this section of the populace would never support the country going into a civil war. Economic and ideological disparities in the southern provinces, like Khost, Paktia, Pakitka and Zabul, where there are greater chances of foreign interference from

neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Different groups of Afghans, to include the Hazara, Uzbek and Tajik communities, have constructed small, community-centric industries and physical assets worth USD millions. With economic dependence as a platform for regional cooperation, these groups would be discouraged from supporting a civil war which would decrease cross-border trade. Moreover, the non-Pashtun insurgents of Hizb-ul-Islami and the Northern Alliance are now integrated into localised legislative and administrative structures. For these reasons, it would be unlikely that large populations of Afghanistan would take arms against the Taliban.

In any case, Afghanistan cannot achieve short-term stability (both from a political and an economic point of view), while simultaneously adjusting to new developments-- including an influx of foreigners with potential ties to al-Qaeda, and additionally, Pakistan's ultra-violent minority who may enter Afghanistan as a consequence of Pakistan's *Zarb-e Azab* military operations in Waziristan. Although the Afghan security forces display courage and resilience, in reality, Afghan national forces still lack strategic capabilities and equipment, specifically in terms of air power and reconnaissance capacity. On the other hand, parts of Afghanistan have been overwhelmed by Islamic State (IS) militants, particularly in the Nangharhar province. The IS constitutes a breakaway from the Taliban group, and has worked to destabilise Afghanistan through their growing violence on Afghan civilians, government officials and security personnel. The Afghan government maintains an administrative system, but has a reduced capacity to govern in complex environments, and does not provide a transparent method of governance. Afghan control is restricted to 'Kabul, Highway One, its provincial capitals and nearly all of the district centers' (Rahmanullah, 2013).

As a key to the NSRI, Afghan peace is probable only when the Taliban agrees to engage in peace talks, to which effect, many meetings were periodically held outside of Afghanistan which did not see desired results. A senior journalist and topic analyst, Rahimullah Yusufzai, said, "hardly any one of the Taliban commanders would like to hold peace talks with the Afghan government, however, a majority of Taliban do not like peace dialogue with the Afghan government, Taliban are under Pakistan's influence, but Pakistan cannot compel them for peace discussion, the decision of peace talks rests with Taliban" (Denoon, 2015). Even recently-held multilateral peace talks between China, the US, Pakistan and the Taliban failed, because the latter group demanded

a complete restoration of their 2001 territorial holdings, and a total evacuation of foreign forces from Afghanistan. Consequently, Afghanistan is suffering the opportunity cost of lost commercial investment, as the country has no clear end to the conflict in its territory. The scale of conflict has increased due to a proxy war of foreign powers in the Afghan imbroglio. Development activities on behalf of Pakistan, Iran, India and China have swelled in the post-2014 Afghanistan context increased, in view of the vacuum created by the decrease of US forces. Each group wants to install a preferential and cooperative government in Afghanistan (Masdiq, 2006). Intervention by foreign powers has always threatened political stability in Afghanistan. For decades, the international community and regional countries have competed for vested interests on Afghan soil (Ganguly, 2013). This battle for influence continues even today, subjecting Afghanistan to continued turmoil, disorder, and insecurity—the biggest threats to the NSRI.

### **1.3. Partner conflicts: No ending**

Twenty-eight countries signed the US' proposal for a Silk Route Revival, which indicates their strong resolve in 'intra-governmentalism' or 'intra-state cooperation' for Afghanistan's economic integration with South and Central Asia. But in actual practice, most, if not all of these countries, have conflicts of interest in Afghanistan and throughout the region as a whole. These diverging interests call into question each country's resolve to restore or soften national borders as a prerequisite for the NSRI. One may, for instance, take the case of India and Pakistan. Both states are declared NSI partner states, although, they have complex bi-lateral relations, as discussed below.

#### **I. Indo-Pak stand-off**

Unhealthy Indo-Pak relations have defined South Asian history, to include the Partition of the Indian sub-continent, the formation of two separate nation-states on its debris, and subsequent conflict on the princely state of Jammu & Kashmir (also called Greater Kashmir) on religious, historical, and ideological grounds. Both India and Pakistan fought the first war on Kashmir in 1947-48, which led to the unnatural division of Kashmir into two parts: Indian-administered Kashmir (Jammu & Kashmir state) and the Pakistan-administered Kashmir (PAK). The division is affected through a 'zero physical' or 'no-go line' called the Line of Control (LoC). The conflict

is so critical that both countries vainly fought subsequent wars throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s (Kumar 2015). Tense relations were compounded with the onset of a separatist movement in Jammu & Kashmir against New Delhi and its allied militancy since the early 1990s.

This already complex security and development situation became aggravated after the 9/11 attacks. Each country took a different position regarding the Afghan conflict. Pakistan supports the Taliban's return to power to maintain a strategic advantage (Rashid, 2014). India, however, opposes the Taliban, being justifiably nervous that the Taliban will come to radicalise (Kaw, 2016) and reinforce insurgency and secessionism within the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir (Sachdeva, 2015; Chatterjee, 2013). These radically opposite positions exemplify the severed India-Pakistan relationship (Jacon, 2016; Sawhney, *et al*, 2011) to the detriment of the NSRI. As India's footprint started growing in Afghanistan, Pakistan sought to counter India's development (Puri, 2015). Pakistan alleges that four Indian consulates in Afghanistan, especially in Kandahar and Jalalabad, are misused by Indian intelligence agencies to destabilize both Afghanistan and Pakistan (Yadav, and Barwa, 2011). Predictably, while Pakistan supports the Taliban against a new pro-India Afghan government, India has made an effort to deter the influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan. Yadav and Barwa rightly profile the Indian Afghan perception: "by drawing Afghanistan away from its economic and geopolitical dependence on Pakistan, India hopes to weaken the resources base of the Taliban, or to at least provide alternative sources of income and resources for the Karzai regime" (Ved, 2008).

Pakistan hopes to manipulate the proposed China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to forge a new regional setting, comprising of Russia, China, Turkey, Pakistan and Iran—which by implication is anti-India. Pakistan is allowing the use of its space for the transit of Afghan goods to the Indian border, but is rejecting Indian goods from transit to Afghanistan (Sachdeva, 2015; Torjensen and Stankovic, 2010). As an alternative, India has built rail, road and sea links between Iran and Afghanistan by way of the Iranian port cities of Bandar Abbas and Chahbahar (Tripathi, 2015).

Both India and Pakistan, as the signatories of the NSRI, reveal deeply entrenched patterns of enmity, which is not suitable for relaxed travel and trade as is mandated under the NSRI project



(Gunaratna and Woodal, 2015). As a result, this traditional bi-lateral rivalry has been one of the factors responsible for delays in the implementation of the TAPI and APTTA projects (Riedel, 2013).

## **II. Pakistan-Afghanistan impasse**

The progress of building an economic corridor from Afghanistan to India, and between other South Asian countries, is again stalled by unhealthy Pak-Afghan relations. This is especially true following the attacks on 9/11, which exacerbated regional shifts in the balance of power, and prompted state reactions to new developments.

These relations present a “complex and complicated nexus” since the British designation of the Durand Line in 1893 (Lepage, 2013). The Afghans reject this border on the grounds that it divided people of common history, race and culture while dispossessing Afghanistan of territory they have been holding since Ahmad Shah Durrani’s times. Afghanistan resisted Pakistan’s UN membership in 1947 (Hassan, 2015; Wolpert, 2010). On the other hand, Pakistan supports the Taliban on account of shared history, race, culture and ideology (Kukreja, 2003; Aman Puri, 2015). Pakistan has strategic reasons behind their support of the Taliban, to work against growing Indian influence and development aid in Afghanistan (World focus Series, 2008). India, while under the first Indo-Afghan alliance, was one of Afghanistan’s single largest donors in the 1980s (Peimani, 2003). Since then, Pakistan perceives Afghanistan as an enemy rather than a partner (Javadi, 2015). In some respects, Pakistan’s support to the Taliban is part of a larger, long-standing proxy war between India on Afghani soil (Curtis, 2012). Thus, Pakistan’s objective in Afghanistan is to ensure that Afghanistan is “largely under its influence and has little contact with India” (Farooq Raoufi, 2015).

The Pakistan-Taliban alliance is a key means by which to achieve Pakistan’s idealized vision in Afghanistan (Dalrymple, 2013). According to Stephen Cohen, Pakistan’s support of the Taliban is not so much a choice as it is a necessity for Pakistan due to its stakes in Afghanistan and Baluchistan. In this case, Pakistan’s funding of the Taliban is driven solely by Pakistan’s fears of Indian regional supremacy, among other reasons. Historian William Dalrymple explains that this

policy is “not to spite the US or Karzai, but entirely and obsessively to avoid being surrounded by India” (Piehler, 2013).

The Pak-Afghan differences heightened with the post-9/11 US-Afghan invasion, the end of the Taliban regime, and the installation of a provisional or “puppet regime” in 2001. Afghanistan's chaos renewed Pakistan’s sense of regional insecurity. As a result, Pakistan continued its policy of supporting the Taliban (Dalrymple, 2015) for resumption of power and for the elimination of US regional hegemony (Cavanna, 2015).

Theoretically, Pakistan is a partner to the US’ counterterrorism mission. In practice, however, it aligned itself with the Afghan Taliban (Dasgupta, 2013), indicating a ‘dualism’ in the Pakistani political system that “allows contradictory policies to coexist in parallel, even on national security issues (Farooq Raoufi, 2015). The lack of a unified policymaking apparatus has thus allowed Pakistan’s support of insurgent groups to continue, despite nominal allegiance to the US. The lack of a unified policymaking apparatus has thus allowed Pakistan’s support of insurgent groups to continue, despite Pakistan’s outward allegiance to the US.

Similarly, the delay and failure of the Afghan peace process is sometimes attributed to Pakistan’s desire to see Afghanistan as independent. Afghan officials have frequently accused Pakistan of derailing the peace process between the Karzai government and the Taliban (Raja, 2013). Former Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Ershad Ahmadi argued that Pakistan has a “grand design” in which it seeks to establish “little fiefdoms around the country in which the Taliban- its most important strategic asset in Afghanistan, plays an influential role” (Fair and Watson, 2015). Pakistan views the withdrawal (US withdrawal) as an opportunity to improve its security by strengthening the Taliban (Merwais, 2015). Accordingly, Pakistan has pressured Taliban officials by arresting some to control the Taliban’s political agenda. Hence, the Pakistan’s support of the Taliban combines Pakistan’s compulsions as well as strategies to safeguard Pakistan’s interests (Rosenberg, 2013).

Karzai, as well as the new President, Ashraf Ghani, both hold Pakistan responsible for supporting the Taliban in contradiction to the Afghan government. Taliban violence increased in

Afghanistan after the withdrawal of foreign troops, which shifted security responsibility to the new Afghan government in 2014. While Afghanistan blames Pakistan for heightened violence, Pakistan simultaneously accuses the Afghan government of supporting the Taliban's violence in Pakistan. In fact, the US, India and Afghan government together allege Pakistan's 'double-role' in Afghan insurgency—although Pakistan has repeatedly denied the allegations.

The Pak-Afghan estrangement widened with the new Afghan government's growing tilt towards India. Reportedly, American forces recently caught Afghan intelligence officials colluding with the Pakistani Taliban through an Indian intelligence source (Hassan, 2017). One Afghan official defended the move, explaining, "Everyone has an angle, that's the way we think. Some people said we needed our own" (Tanrisever, 2013). Since Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India have all supported proxy groups at one point—Pakistan's Taliban support is not unprecedented. However, it is undeniable that Pakistan has most consistently supported proxies in Afghanistan (Kaw, 2014).

Consequently, the Pak-Afghan armies often exchange fire, killing soldiers on both sides of the Durand Line. The Turkham pass, hitherto soft, has eventually become rigid for the movement of trade and travel on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border. This is a serious bottleneck to the launching of the NSRI project for South and Central Asian integration (Tadjbaksh, 2011), since the main objective of the project is greater connectivity and removal of barriers.

### **III. Pak-US deadlock**

Pakistan-US relations are not consistently friendly. The US is not aligned with Pakistan's policy towards counterinsurgency. Pakistan has received USD billions for counterinsurgency work in Afghanistan. This third-party funding gave Pakistan strategic access to the US and others in pleading the Kashmir cause across international forums. Pakistan's independent funding has also helped for the US to consider Afghan policy from a Pakistani-centric perspective (Khan and Rehman, 2014). However, many Pakistani elected officials faced grass-roots level dissent for their public affiliation with US officials. A majority of Pakistan's population supports anti-US rhetoric, which has led to massive internal resistance and criticism of the US-allied branches within Pakistan's government. Pakistan's public grew angry after the US drone attacks inside

Pakistan, which killed a number of innocent Pakistani nationals (Rashid, 2010). Ahmed Rashid noted in 2010 that with the US involvement in Afghanistan approaching, the US-Pak relations seemed hollow for the first time since 2001 (Shane and Lehren, 2010; Dutt and Bansal, 2012). Positive exchanges between the US and Pakistan were not sincere, because the US was always uncomfortable with Pakistan's status as a nuclear armed power outside of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Wiki-Leaks disclosed that, since 2007, the US was trying to covertly decommission one of Pakistan's research reactors because it contained highly enriched uranium which could be transformed into an illicit nuclear device or sold in a black market (Mohanty, 2013). In early 2011, American intelligence reported that since Obama's presidency, Pakistan has steadily expanded its nuclear arsenal, purportedly to surpass Britain in having the world's fifth largest nuclear weapons stockpile (Cheema and Mahmud, 2007). The US's response was to strike a balance between two nuclear-armed South Asian rivals, to the detriment of nuclear non-proliferation and regional peace (Rashid, 2010). According to Ahmad Rashid,<sup>4</sup> peace can be restored only when 'these two neighbours [India and Pakistan] sit down and talk about a common approach to both Kabul and Kashmir, rather than negotiating by proxy war' (Schmitz and Wolters, 2012; Mosello, 2008).

Consequently, the US-Pak relationship is not on good terms, which is evidenced by the US' changed foreign policy towards Pakistan, to include the cessation of annual funding to Pakistan for counterinsurgency activities, the US' denial of subsidies on the sale of the US F-16 jets, and the growing pressure on behalf of US Congressmen to declare Pakistan a 'terrorist' state.

#### **IV. Central-Asian state conflicts**

The five Central Asian republics, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, are additionally signatories to the NSRI project. These countries have pledged to facilitate its execution by softening their national borders for free trade and transportation. Many fear that these public declarations are simply rhetoric, because these states are embroiled in overlapping political, ethnic, economic and other conflicts. Trade agreements between these

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmad Rashid is a journalist who has been covering Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia for more than twenty years. He is a correspondent for the Wall Street Journal, Far Eastern Economic Review, Daily Telegraph, and The Nation, a leading newspaper in Pakistan. He has written many books on Taliban, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

countries are fragile, since politics inevitably dominates their economics (Kucera, 2011). The border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has closed for over 18 months at a time, on account of Uzbek-Kyrgyz ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan (Stourbridge, 2011). Bilateral Tajik-Uzbek trade relations are unsound due to disputes over water and energy supplies. Under the former Soviet system, Uzbekistan supplied gas to Tajikistan in exchange for water. However, after their independence, these countries disputed water and energy distribution, either on concerns of supply, or due to increase in price as per the international market demand.

A result of this conflict was rising commodity prices—Uzbekistan hiked cargo transit fees five times for gas, and Tajikistan responded with an increase by two times for water prices. Tajikistan understands that Uzbekistan hikes the rate of its energy supplies purportedly to cripple the Tajik economy (Fuost, 2011). On the other hand; Uzbekistan believes that Tajikistan holds back water to Uzbekistan during peak seasons of crop irrigation. Similar types of conflict exist between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which also lessens the potential for mutually beneficial business activity (Fedorenko, 2013). The President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazabayev, is deeply interested in the NSRI project (Kucera, 2012). He has a demonstrated interest in improving Kazakhstan's trade relations with other countries, and to make the Caspian port of Aktau a fulcrum of the NSRI (Kuchins, and Mankoff, 2015). Despite these positive developments, Kazakhstan also has differences with Uzbekistan on the issue of regional leadership.

Thus, the Central Asian NSRI members have both inter and intra-state disputes regarding land, resources, regional leadership, and ethnicity. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and other regional forums are not helpful in resolving differences between member states. The Central Asian countries are skeptic about regular trans-border trade with Afghanistan for its unending insecurity, and which is subordinate to their respective economic interests of political stability and peace in Afghanistan (World Bank, 2016). Tension between Central Asian states have hampered proposals for and investment in hydropower generation. As an example, the CASA-1000 project for hydropower transmission, which would run from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan, was delayed on account of resistance from the Uzbekistan government (Kaw, 2016). Although the CASA-1000 project is progressing,

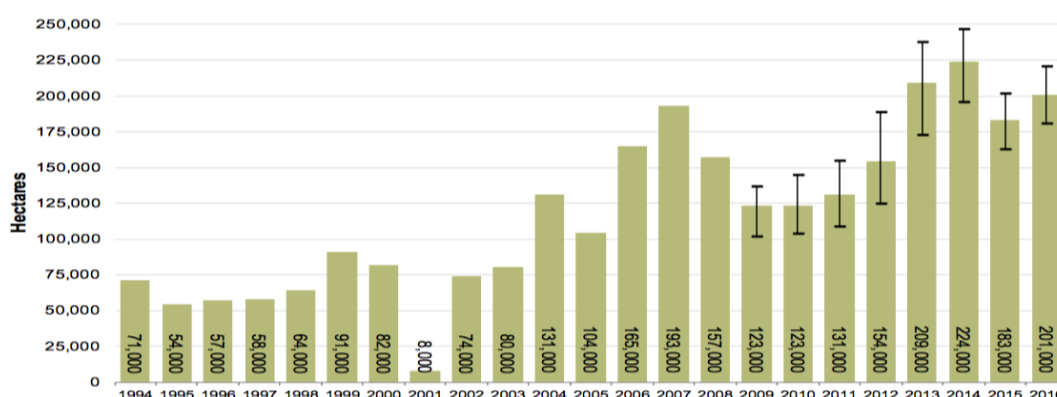
development is slow as the project only has funding from the Chinese banks under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor project.

## V. Ailing Afghan economy

Afghanistan's economic profile is in danger of collapse on account of continued conflict, shrinking foreign aid, reduced assistance and investment, growing security expenses, mis-governance, corruption, unauthorized cash transactions, and drug and arms smuggling, among other factors (World Bank, 2016). The Afghan economy had improved immediately after the US-Afghan invasion in 2001, with the country's economic growth reaching 10.5 percent between 2005 and 2012 (World Bank, 2012). However, the initial level of growth was not sustainable, as commerce was driven by the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan. Military and civilian aid grew from the 'light footprint' figure of \$404 million in 2002/2003 (Hogg, 2013) to a massive \$15.7 billion in 2010/2011, which was similar to Afghanistan's total gross domestic product (GDP) the same year (World Bank, 2016). From 2009 to 2012, Afghanistan was the world's largest annual recipient of official development assistance (ODA) (Interim Afghan Administration, 2002). Despite international efforts, Afghanistan remains a rentier state, highly dependent on foreign aid and assistance (Dietl, 2015). Decades of dependence on foreign-aid has decreased the state's interest in trade (Dutta, 2015). This process of rent-seeking has also re-ingrained a culture of 'aid-rentierism' among the Afghan elite, who compete internally for political rents from the international community.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai did not support the proposed 2008 agenda to develop the private sector. The 2008 agenda sought to reduce poverty and to ensure more sustainable development between 2008–2013 (Ghiassy *et al*, 2015). Little was done to effectively build the economy through an inclusive, formalized, and competitive marketplace. No serious effort was made to support economic engagement of the underprivileged populations, such as the rural poor, women and Afghan youth (The Current Analyst, 2009). Informal and unregulated markets dominate the country's economy, alongside an increase in criminal activities associated with opium cultivation (Costa, 2008). Despite the billions of USD spent on elimination, poppy production expanded to nearly all of the Afghanistan provinces. In 2004, the export value of opium was 61 percent of the country's lawful GDP (UNDCP, 2001).

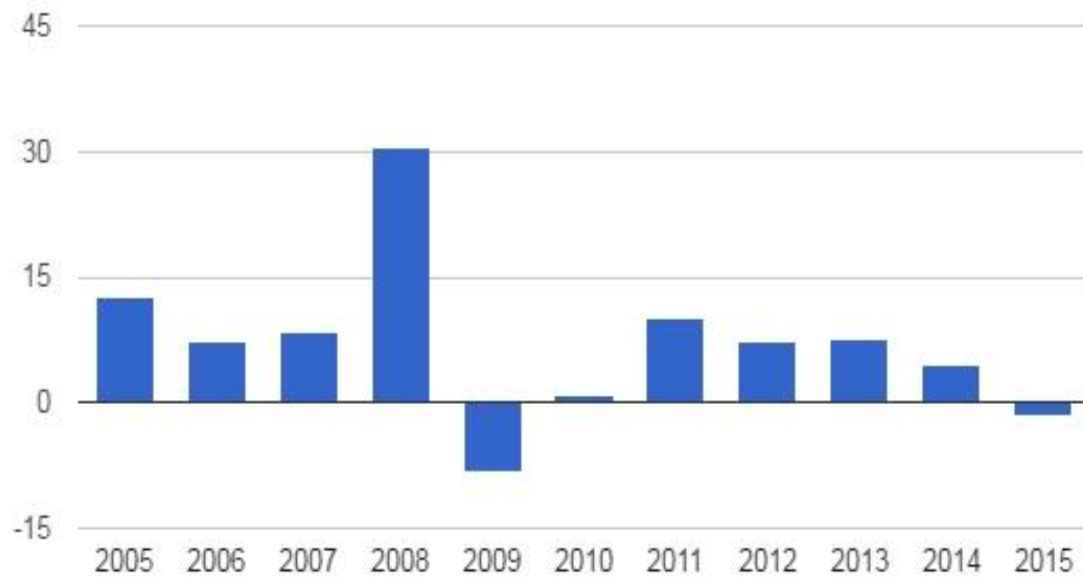
## Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan 1994-2016 (hectares)



**Source:** UNODC/MCN *Opium Surveys 1994-2016*. The vertical lines represent the upper and lower bounds of the 95% confidence interval

The export value of poppy declined during 2009-2010 in relative terms, partially due to overall national growth in other economic sectors. Still, rates of domestic poppy cultivation were the highest on record in 2014 (Weinbaum, 2007). The scope of these illegal activities form what Weinbaum refers to as ‘a capitalist intensity that in another enterprise would be laudable’ (United Nations Human Development Report, 2016). Even today, Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the Asia-Pacific region, with wide-ranging social and economic challenges. Afghanistan’s Human Development Index (HDI) value was 0.479 in 2015, which indicates low human development, positioning it at 169 out of 188 countries (UNSPECA, 2016). Gross National Income (GNI) per capita decreased by about 9.7 percent between 1990 and 2015. The inflation rate constantly soared, averaging around 7.25 percent between 2005 and 2015, with a minimum of -8.28 percent in 2009 and a maximum of 30.55 percent in 2008. Combined with low rates of GDP per capita, the country ranked as one of the top 20 lowest GDP values in 2013. Imports overshadowed exports, leading to a trade deficit, notably in 2011, due to the lack of state support for domestic production and its rigid rules of marketing. The inflation rate swelled over the years and declined towards 2015. The following data typically exemplifies the same:

### Afghanistan inflation (2005-2015)



**Source:** *The Global Economy.com*, The World Bank.

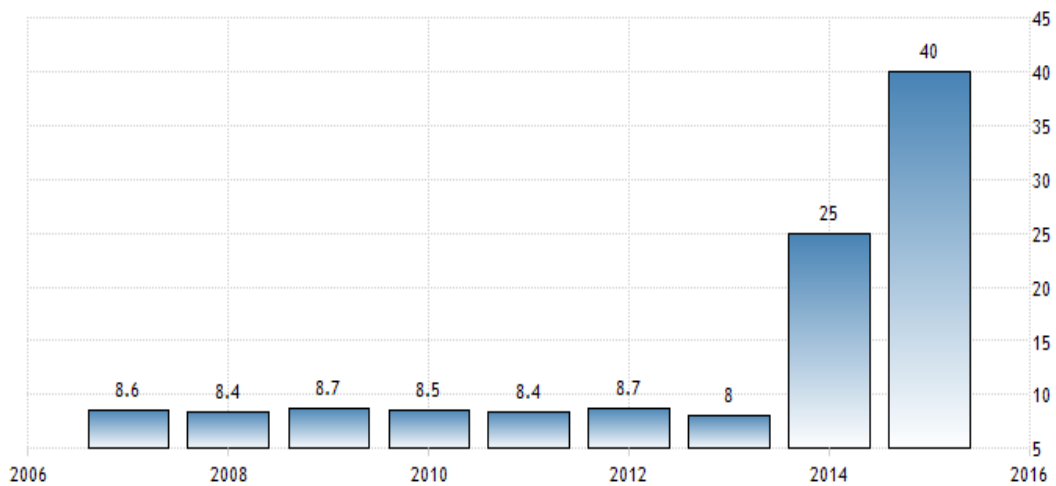
As shown in the graphic above, the level of FDI sharply decreased after the US-Afghan invasion, notably during the partial pull-out of troops in late 2014. The total green-field FDI<sup>5</sup> inflows for the period 2009-2015 were recorded at around \$1.2 billion (Baheen, 2014). The United Arab Emirates was the largest foreign investor, with \$512 million from 2009-2015, followed by China at \$300 million—combined, this is three quarters of Afghanistan’s total FDI (World Bank, 2016). Central Asian investment in Afghanistan was nil (Zhanma, 2015). Over time, the declining levels of FDI in Afghanistan lead to unemployment in Afghanistan. According to the World Bank report 2001, 4.6 percent, 4.9 percent and 4.5 percent of the Afghan work force was unemployed in 2002, 2003 and 2004, respectively. Unemployment levels reached 8.5 percent in 2005, which remained nearly the same until 2013 and went as high as 25 percent and 40 percent in 2014 and 2015 respectively (Bumiller, 2009). It averaged 10.40 percent from 1991 - 2015, reaching an all-time high of 40.00 percent in 2015 and a record low of 8.00 percent in 2013. The following graph is elucidating:

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<sup>5</sup> Green field is a different type of FDI. Green-field investments occur when a parent company or government begins a new venture by constructing new facilities in a country outside of where the company is headquartered.



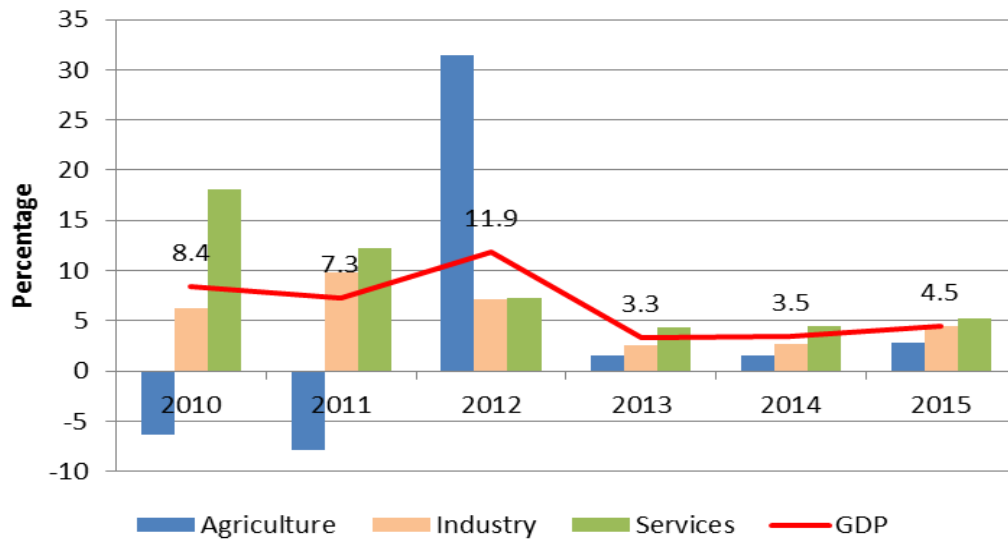
## Afghanistan unemployment scenario



Source: [www.tradingeconomic.com](http://www.tradingeconomic.com), World Bank.

Activity from tourism was at record highs in the 1970s, when 90,000 tourists from all over the world visited Afghanistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Fewer tourists chose to visit Afghanistan's sites of architectural heritage (Alikuzai, 2013), such as: famous Buddha Statues (Bhatia, 2003; Nazari and Hillman, 2007), the tomb of Hazrat Ali in Mazar-e-Sharif (Tanner, 2009), the city of Balkh, and the structures of previous Kushan and Mongol civilizations (Gul, 2013). One of the most admired natural landscapes of Afghanistan is Band-e-Amir, the country's first national park and wildlife conservation area. UNESCO has identified two World Heritages in Afghanistan. One is the Minaret of Jam, which was added to the World Heritage list in 2002 and the other is the Bamiyan valley, which was officially designated in 2003. Activity from eco-tourism increased after the 2014 withdrawal of foreign forces.

In consequence, economic growth at 11.9 percent in 2012 reduced to 3.3 percent in 2013 (Asian Development Bank, 2014). During 2014 and 2015, GDP growth was 3.5 percent and 4.5 percent, respectively (World Bank, 2015). The following ADB information is self-explanatory:



**Source:** “Asian Development Outlook 2014: Fiscal Policy for Inclusive Growth,” *Asian Development Bank*, Philippines, 2014.

The triple (political, security, and economic) transition exposed Afghanistan to a number of vulnerabilities: a fiscal gap (the budget deficit excluding international aid), an estimated 20 percent of the 2015 GDP, alarmingly rose. Tax collection and customs control, also called tax revenues, fell from 11.6 percent of GDP in 2011 to 8.4 percent in 2014 and increased to 22 percent in 2015 (Byrd, 2015).

Today’s government in Afghanistan is suffering from a decreased capacity to fiscal revenue from economic activity. As a result, the Afghan Government is unable to independently meet around \$5 billion of its annual security expenses, which are worth nearly 20 percent of the country’s GDP. Currently, Afghan security expenses are partially met by the international community, but this is not sustainable long term (GOIRA, 2015).

Afghanistan faced a tremendous trade imbalance of \$7.12 billion in 2014, constituting a 1:14 ratio (World Bank, 2015). The total estimated trade deficit was 37.9 percent of GDP in 2014 (World Bank, 2016). Imports from these four partners (Pakistan, India, the USA and the EU) account for 80-90 percent of the total consumer market value (Afghan Central Statistics Office,

2015). Neighbouring states export low-grade goods and edibles that Afghanistan's own private sector would be able to produce with better domestic economic integration.

After 2014, FDI virtually ceased, which negatively impacted the industrial and trade sectors (World Bank, 2005). Employment rates suffered and imports increased relative to exports—for instance, in dry fruits (Rauf, 2014). Afghanistan's sharp decrease in FDI increased the difficulty of reimbursing salaries in American Dollars and in Euros, as was the case earlier (Rahmanullah, 2015). The Afghan economy and currency is erratic after 2014 (Rosenberg, 2013), which deters the development of a self-sufficient economy. *The New York Times* reported that, "Afghanistan is decades away from self-sufficiency, it currently covers only about 20 percent of its own bills, with the rest paid by the United States and its allies" (Samira Javadi, 2015). Under the current circumstances, the Afghan government is hardly able to meet the salary obligations of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan police. This trend of decreased spending can lead to gaps in training, and can make the Afghan armed forces less able to deter the Taliban or other threats to state security (Bosco Model United Nations, 2014).

Afghanistan's private sector is widely inactive. The country has no refined tax policy (Dietl, 2015), and after 2014, tax collection has become a challenging task (UNDP, 2014). The country's little wealth is inequitably distributed, and the rich-poor gap has widened over time. A neo-rich class evolved with no history of economic elite. In 2014, the United Nations Development Program ranked Afghanistan 169<sup>th</sup> in the world ranking of 187 countries for human development. Unfortunately, this is the lowest ranking country among the Asia regional grouping (World Bank, 2016). For its low GDP at \$20.8 billion in 2014 (in current prices) and a mere \$659 per capita, an average GDP growth rate of 1.9 percent in 2015 is inadequate to alleviate poverty as compared to the population growth rate of 2.7 percent (Rahmanullah, 2015).

Cases of rampant smuggling and corruption across the country pose one of the biggest challenges with the existing government (Vinod, 2015). Until these major issues are addressed, NSRI, TAPI, CASA-1000 and other regional integration projects will have difficulty on account of instability in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's position in the region as a transit country increases the salience of Afghan development and security for the surrounding region (Boon, *et al*, 2011).

## VI. Unstable health care and educational system

Ongoing war and declining foreign involvement have negatively impacted the quality of life in Afghanistan, as shown in different human development indexes. Afghanistan's health care system in 2001 (Levitt *et al*, 2011) was among the poorest in the world because of 23 years of conflict, a collapsed economy, and three years of drought. Apart from the shortage of basic life amenities to include food, shelter and clothing, the country has a poor health care system relative to global standards. Unfortunately, acute respiratory illnesses, diarrheal diseases, and malnutrition affects a wide proportion of the youth population (Peoples Health Movement, 2011). Health care workers are scarce at every level. Country-wide shortages of medicines, vaccines, equipment and fuel cannot meet the high demand for healthcare in complex and conflict-affected environments. Roughly 6 million people have either no access or limited access to health care. As a result, life expectancy rates are among the lowest in the world. Nearly 25 percent of Afghani children die before their fifth birthday (Save the Children, 2002). Less than 15 percent of deliveries are attended by trained health workers, whom are mostly traditional birth attendants (Nojumi *et al*, 2008). About half of Afghanistan's children under 5 years of age are shorter than the national average in height due to chronic malnutrition, and up to 10 percent have acute malnutrition. Among the Afghan population, 30–50 percent have stress-related ailments (Tischler, 2011; Dwivedi, 2009). More than 60 percent of all childhood deaths and disabilities in Afghanistan are due to respiratory infections, diarrhoea, and vaccine-preventable deaths—especially measles (World Education News & Reviews, 2016). The data provided in the following section is representative of the scenario described above.

### Basic statistics

Indicators	Years	Statistics
Total population	2015	32, 527, 000
Gross National Income per capita (ppp international \$,)	2015	1940
Life expectancy at birth male/female (years)	2015	59/62
Probability of dying between 15 and 60 years male/female (per 1000 population)	2015	284/239
Total expenditure on health per capita (international \$)	2014	167
Total expenditure on health as percentage of GDP	2014	8.2

Source: *World Health Organization, 2015.*

Likewise, institutional damages during the war have decreased common access to higher education. Schools, colleges and universities are expunged, damaged or partly restored. School-level classrooms are far and few between. Despite rapid expansion over the last decade, institutions for higher education lack the capacity to meet student demands, especially at the master's and almost non-existent doctoral levels (World Bank, 2013). Qualified students who can pay for education abroad often seek to do so. "The shortage of higher education opportunities," the World Bank noted in 2013, "has resulted in many Afghan students pursuing degree and postgraduate degree programs abroad" (World Education News & Reviews, 2016). Estimates of the expat student population were recorded at 5,000 by the World Bank in 2013 17,000 by the UNESCO in 2013, with 9,033 (53 percent) in Iran, 2,330 (14 percent) in India, 1,310 (eight percent) in Turkey, 1,226 (seven percent) in Saudi Arabia, and 428 (three percent) in the United States (Iran Times, 2016). The number of such students in the US increased by only 10 percent during 2010-2015.

## VII. The NSRI: Exclusive nature

Separate from the challenges discussed above, the NSRI is exclusive in that it does not recognize China and Iran as its economic partners. China is excluded because it is becoming a greater competitor to the US in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Iran is not a participant in the initiative because of their ongoing nuclear programme and their anti-Israel position. This will be a major obstacle to the project's success, as no integration project in this region is perceivable without Chinese and Iranian involvement. China and Iran would help to guarantee the project's success despite other challenges: both countries have been important players of the ancient Silk Route; both directly border Afghanistan; both are important partners to the region's energy-production-consumption-structure; and both have high levels of trade with Afghanistan. In addition, China intends to invest around \$10 billion on Afghanistan's mining and extractive sector, having already won the international tenders for this purpose. Afghanistan's western neighbour, Iran had a valued \$1.5 billion of trade in 2016 (Ebel, 2010; Kryzanek, 2016), a figure which could

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<sup>6</sup> This reflects discussions held with the faculty members of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Prof. Ajay K Patnaik, Prof. Mondira Dutta, and Prof. Gulshan Dietl. These academics support that the main cause of the failure New Silk Route initiative is the competing One Belt, One Route initiative (OBOR) which the most nation states show their will to participate in the initiative under the dynamic leadership of Chinese President, Xi Jinping and of its huge funds. This could make the China the best competitor of the 21st Century.

have been even higher in absence of economic sanctions (Kaw, 2014). Iran additionally has ethnic stakes in Afghanistan. Iran backs the *Shiite* ethnic minority of Hazaras in northern Afghanistan, and its growing influence is also felt in the cultural fabric of Kabul and other areas (Tripathai, 2015).

### **VIII. General barriers**

Though conceived by the US, the NSRI did not remain a priority because of its “Failed Peace Mission” in Afghanistan. Security priorities overtook economic integration, and the focus shifted from economic development to security pursuits (Sachdeva, 2015). Similarly, while regional agricultural development was identified as a priority, international actors could not meet the needs of farmers—mainly in transporting goods to the international markets (Byrd and Raiser, 2006). On the other hand, high levels of bureaucratization stifled trade; neither trade preferences nor tariff rates have been harmonized; and customs procedures have become both incompatible and time-intensive. Cargo-laden trucks are subjected to inspection based on the size of the vehicles, the history of the carrier, and the disposition of border agents at the time of interaction. Customs officials and other inspection agencies may be corrupt. Visa restrictions are rigid for foreign truck drivers. Coordination between Afghan national development and foreign partners has been missing (Puri, 2015). These barriers have led to duplicative efforts and inadequate synergy over projects with overlapping interests. The biggest obstacles to success were again accentuated by the endemic and top-down corruption in Afghanistan. This stereotype discouraged both donors and private investors from investing on the NSRI and related projects (Sachdeva, 2015). More importantly, many such projects were already announced by Iran, China, Russia, India and the EU, suggesting both a practical overlap and a decreased motivation for the NSRI. While the NSRI was said to benefit all involved—as in the “Eurasian globalization,” some regional states were still inclined to view international relations in zero-sum terms. Such thinking acted as an additional barrier to the NSRI (Dietl, 2015).

### **2. Conclusion**

The NSRI is a promising vision, yet it may not be able to overcome the challenges ahead. The ultimate success of the NSRI is dependent on a solution to the continued Taliban-Afghan conflict; to the unending Afghan political insecurity; to the growing infighting amongst the

Islamist insurgents (both Taliban and IS); to the mutual enmity among Afghanistan and within its neighbouring states. Challenges include the interference of foreign forces through proxy war in Afghanistan; appalling decline in Afghan economy; endemic corruption; arms and narcotic smuggling; mis-governance and the absence of the rule of law. These obstacles, acting as a deterrent to the NSRI, support the political theory that economic integration is difficult to achieve without political peace and stability in Afghanistan. By such a standard, the NSRI is workable in a situation where the partners have homogeneity in thought, approach and intent. Sadly, most of the countries involved in the NSRI have poor relations amongst themselves, which casts doubt on the potential for a successful outcome.

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