



### **Afghanistan: A New Beginning, A New Hope**

Along with the four great inventions of ‘paper making’, ‘gunpowder’, ‘printing’ and ‘compass’ the Chinese also started the historic network of trade routes early in the Han dynasty which became popular under the name of the “Silk Road (丝绸之路)”. The “Silk Road” formed the historic link between China and the Roman Empire connecting China, India, Persia, Arabia and Europe trespassing through the Dunhuang, Kashgar, the Himalayas, the Pamirs, the Merv and the Damascus. The route derived its name especially from the trade of Chinese silk from China to the outside- Central Asia, Persia, Africa, Europe and India through the exploration of the Chinese envoy Zhang Qian (张骞). Along with trade, it also opened up long-distance political, economic and cultural ties between these ancient civilizations. Similar to the Silk Road there also existed similar connecting platforms like the Persian Royal Road established during the Achaemenid Empire which ran through Susa in North Persia (present day Iran) to the Mediterranean Sea in Asia Minor (present day Turkey). Similar to the Silk Road the main purpose of such linking platforms was exchange of trade and commerce between the different regions.

But alongside serving the economic utility, the Silk Road also fulfilled other missions. Several small and large settlements were built along the linking paths to accommodate the traders and the travelers on their journey. This in turn also facilitated the exchange of several languages, culture, distinct goods and even religion between Central Asia and the east. Buddhism also was spread from India to China through the Silk Road. Several Buddhist artifacts and grottoes were also built along the Silk Road dedicated to the amalgamation of culture and religion during that period. The Silk Road also served as the road leading to peace for refugees who had to flee from

one place to another in search for a safe destination and peace during times of wars and battles. Thus the Silk Road linked communities, people, religions, culture and also economies and spread hope and prosperity among several civilizations.

Keeping this historic creation in mind and with a greater vision for the future, the United States in 2011 started initiating the new idea of a greater Central Asian economic and infrastructure integration and with the aspiration towards further political stability and support to Afghanistan. Later in 2013, the Chinese president Xi Jinping (习近平) also brought out his idea of the “New Silk Road” which he called the Maritime Silk Route which would facilitate foreign trade, exchange of energy, promote infrastructure development in Asia and also consolidate China’s influence in the region. Both the United States and China are extremely keen for developing the energy resources in Central Asia and the surrounding region.

During the ancient Silk Road which flourished during the Chinese Han Dynasty, Central Asian countries including Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan, as well as modern-day Pakistan and India were the recipients of the wave of globalisation during that time. Central Asia formed the pivotal joint connecting the valuable and precious exchange of silk, spices, jade and other goods from the east to the west and vice-versa. But today when we look at the same path, Central Asian countries especially Afghanistan are more or less evolving around intra-regional trade though with immense potential, than promoting an international global trade on a broader spectrum.

In the aftermath of the 9/11, development of Afghanistan can only revive its nation through a more active economic functionality and prove itself to the external world. Its geographic location and potential components should accelerate and push the process of opening up and integrating with the outside for Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s vivid natural resources offer miraculous solutions to the issue of its development and the renewal of its state. The priced resources of Afghanistan’s oil, gas, copper, iron, gemstones, and more if combined with an effective and functional transportation grid can offer an outstanding solution a promising future to Afghanistan’s economy building even independent of any kind of foreign assistance.

Amidst several devastation, destruction and poverty in Afghanistan, the land provides a spectacular stunning beauty which valleys, snow clad mountains and lakes. The land was in fact

famous for its exotic and rare rail stop during the 1960s which caught the attraction of several tourists with the snowcapped mountains, relics from thousands years old empires, deserts and lush valleys. Authentic afghan music is in demand everywhere in the international market but most of it in Afghanistan is generally made only for the internal domestic market and hardly reaches the international world unless it is recorded and produced in the west. Therefore Afghanistan holds within itself a great potential not only for its own domestic market but also for the regional or its nearby neighbors and also to serve the international world markets.

Research has proved once and again the presence of undiscovered oil reserves and natural resources in Afghanistan. This throws a positive light for the industrial development of Afghanistan. This could in turn provide multinational oil companies and other nearby governments with a drilling and production program. All neighboring governments including those of Pakistan, India and China are interested in negotiations with the state. It must be accepted that sufficient guarantee of security is essential for the certainty of the real success but the state is surrounded with several booming opportunities. Several areas in the state of Afghanistan show presence of major resource deposits like those of copper, iron, oil and gas. Several countries like Australia, Canada, USA, India, Kazakhstan, Russia and China submit tender offers to the state for mining and allied industries. Along with the above mentioned resources, coal resources are also abundantly available in Afghanistan. Lead, Tin, Gold, Bauxite, Barite and other mineral resources also have their presence in Afghanistan. All these and more can provide attractive investment opportunities both within and outside Afghanistan and lead to a better cooperative partnership with the other Nations if utilized properly.

Afghanistan along with Pakistan, Tajikistan and China also share the Pamir mountain range which is also known as the Bam-i-Duniuh or the “Roof of the World”. History has shown us that these highlands possess and controls the rich lands in the plains sooner or later. Therefore along with the rich natural resources that need to be exploited, new pipelines and rail road trespassing through Afghanistan, a promising future awaits the nation.

Therefore, Afghanistan needs to claim its ancient place and position in the international system- the position of the epicenter of trade, commerce and economic relations with the world, the position of the beautiful tourist attraction, the position of a rich art and cultural propeller. The proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline could provide major

economic benefits for Afghanistan. This in fact has also been a focus of United States' policy. Turkmenistan is also the home to the world's second-largest deposit of natural gas, and the TAPI would also allow for the diversification of its exports not only concentrating on China but also by delivering energy to India and Pakistan. But the project has been continuously delayed due to the challenges in gathering suitable investors. The energy sector is the major driving force in today's society. Therefore, if managed and tackled efficiently, it could pave its path to an extremely luring future with high percentages of economic benefits.

Moreover, Afghanistan also needs to create a more friendly and attractive domestic and internal atmosphere for the outside world so as to invite and attract foreign economies to invest and engage evading the previous pictures of destruction, war and devastation there. It needs to welcome the world into its land and nation with hands stretched forwards in a friendly gesture. Afghanistan cannot any longer just limit itself to the analysis for military operations or political developments and reconstruction processes. It cannot any longer possess a narrow view of the developments in Afghanistan instead should adopt a more holistic approach of the various sectors for the overall development of Afghanistan. There needs to be a change and progress on the part of the international community as well in understanding and analyzing Afghanistan.

Students of International Relations and the Afghanistan fraternity should take the lead and develop and attempt a new guide and newer theories towards understanding and analyzing Afghanistan. For several years now Afghanistan has been receiving aid in forms of finance, resources and political capital for its restructuring but this process has achieved limited results. There have been several analyses justifying this point. Comparatively easy source of money may have discouraged the state from generating local capacity and thus on the contrary lead to the slowing down of the process of development and establishing a sustainable political order In Afghanistan. The domestic government also as result had limited incentives for the development of a standing long term bargain with its people for the development of the entire nation. This may have aggravated the failure of the process of democratization there. This in turn eroded the strength of the nation and enabled adverse oppositional sources to weaken the legitimacy of the nation. The major dependence on foreign external aid both financially, militarily and through other channels produced a conflict between the owners and the controllers. The foreign actors also wanted and desired to exercise a control over their program and the utilization of the funds

and also had an undocumented reform agenda in their minds. The local domestic players therefore also insisted for the similar kind of goals in order to please the international community providing with the aids.

At the end of the day, state building needs to be facilitated and essentially driven by the national and the state actors themselves. This can also ensure a greater accountability and also sustainability of the nation. The nation should take advantage of its own autonomy and assist and initiate the process of nation building. Local ownership and local entrepreneurship should be given the driver's seat for the better facilitation of a self reliant Afghanistan. Afghanistan needs to take advantage and exploit its natural resources, geographic location in order to cooperate and engage with the international players instead of offering an entirely submissive approach towards solving the distorted situated and conditions of the state. This will also generate new opportunities for employment in the state and offer a ray of fresh hope to the people at large.

Afghanistan needs to capture the evolving policy changes of the international players towards itself and indulge itself in a tactical maneuvering and readjustment of the nation. It is time for Afghanistan to move away from the potential challenges and embrace the new options and opportunities with a positive tone. The international players realize their modest gains of cooperating and engaging with Afghanistan in the energy sector, therefore Afghanistan should also take advantage and exploit the opportunities knocking its door. Afghanistan should reclaim its position as the epicenter of the ancient Silk Road in the new trade linkages as well and point out to the world and the great powers the mutual gains and interests of greater cooperation and engagement instead of total reliance and dependence on foreign assistance. Afghanistan needs to balance its relationship with the external international powers and put an effort to derive benefits from both competition and cooperation. The long historical and civilizational relationship needs to be remolded in a newer and modern forms. The old wine needs to be poured into a new bottle and spread a new flavour.

Therefore, it's time that Afghanistan treads on its path of a new foreign policy, a path of dependence and self reliance. It needs to materialize newer policies, test new principles, struggle and cooperate towards a newer world order. Both individual and state actors need to join hands and move towards a new dawn of Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan need to be armed with a new hope towards development, self reliance and sustainability wherein people will put greater

efforts for the emancipation of the self and the building of a stronger and reliant state. And if we speak the version of a great optimist- the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore- “If I can't make it through one door, I'll go through another door - or I'll make a door. Something terrific will come no matter how dark the present.”