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Afghanistan: Building the Missing Link in the Modern Silk Road

In the fall of 2009, the Obama administration undertook a lengthy review of its strategy for the war in Afghanistan that resulted in the controversial decision to increase the U.S. force presence by 30,000 troops in 2010 and to begin withdrawal in July 2011. Most of the spirited public debate revolves around security challenges, such as the number of troops, and choosing a balance between counterinsurgency or counterterrorism strategies. This is understandable given the major investments of blood and treasure the United States will continue to make in the effort to stabilize Afghanistan and root out terrorist threats. But even if U.S. and coalition forces are successful in bringing greater security to Afghanistan, these gains will be short-lived if the United States does not develop a more comprehensive regional strategy *now.* This strategy must go beyond "AfPak" and should make the longer-term economic viability of Afghanistan as high a priority as increasing its near-term security.

In the first half of 2009, the United States established several new transit corridors to deliver nonlethal goods to its forces in Afghanistan. Collectively, these new supply lines have been termed the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). This label underscores the NDN's demilitarized, commercial nature as well as an open-ended vision of a multiplicity of supply routes to Afghanistan. The logic is twofold: relying on multiple transit corridors increases both the security and the leverage of the consumer, in this case the U.S. military. The key point is

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both to increase throughput capacity and to create more competitive market conditions that promote greater cost-efficiency for the client and produce positive spillover in the surrounding region.

Establishing the NDN has engaged new states in cooperation on the Obama administration's first security priority, which is to stabilize Afghanistan. Some individuals are concerned that the NDN makes the United States more vulnerable to certain states, such as Russia and Uzbekistan, whose interests may not be fully aligned with Washington's. Though this worry is justified, critics of the NDN underestimate the economic and political opportunities it has created.

When we began our research in the spring of 2009, we understood that the NDN had the potential to alter the geopolitics of Eurasia as the United States strengthened cooperation with Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. We did not, however, fully anticipate the extent to which our research would highlight the essential importance of a broader Afghan strategy built around a regional trading network akin to the ancient Silk Road of millennia past. Lest we be accused of being wild-eyed dreamers, we acknowledge that the NDN was designed to serve the military's mission in Afghanistan, not to build a Modern Silk Road. But perhaps the most striking aspect of the numerous interviews we conducted with U.S. government officials was their realization that the NDN could serve broader U.S. goals in and beyond Afghanistan. We found that foreign government officials were even more enthusiastic about the opportunities created to expand regional trade and transport.

The NDN offers a unique opportunity to lay a foundation for a Modern Silk Road.

The Afghans themselves understand that their future prosperity is tied to Afghanistan's central role in a reconstituted Eurasian trading network. This view was highlighted in the Afghan National Development Strategy of 2008:

> Afghanistan is a country with significant potential for economic development. It . . . is well positioned to become a trade and business hub linking the markets of Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, and China. The potential exists for sustainable economic growth in the future. . . . Afghanistan's commercial connections to regional and global economies were severely disrupted and must be redeveloped. The development of a competitive private sector will depend on establishing access to foreign markets and developing viable export activities.[1]

The Obama administration's new policy in Afghanistan, however, does not address regional trade and transport. Even if the new approach reverses Taliban momentum and develops a viable Afghan security apparatus, the United States will ultimately fail in Afghanistan if it does not pay high-level attention to the country's future role in regional economic activity. Some senior U.S. officials, however, have resisted our call to promote trade and transport in the region, arguing that the countries which will benefit the most from a Modern Silk Road, such as China, India, Iran, and Pakistan, should take on the lion's share of responsibility for its development. While this might be true to some extent, the United States should embrace its position as a neutral but enthusiastic supporter of the Modern Silk Road and catalyze what would be a major multilateral effort for the common good.

Other critics correctly point out the difficulty of getting various states in the region to cooperate on the Modern Silk Road. In a part of the world often seen through the lens of great power competition, a concerted U.S. effort to develop such a trade route may be misconstrued as a neo-imperialist grab for power and influence. After all, as the godfather of geopolitics Halford Mackinder argued more than a century ago, whoever controls the Eurasian "world island" would control the world. Our analysis leads to a somewhat different conclusion: Afghanistan is the missing link in a unified Eurasian continental trade and transport system—the Modern Silk Road—that would enhance prosperity and security for all.[2]

The Linchpin: the Northern Distribution Network

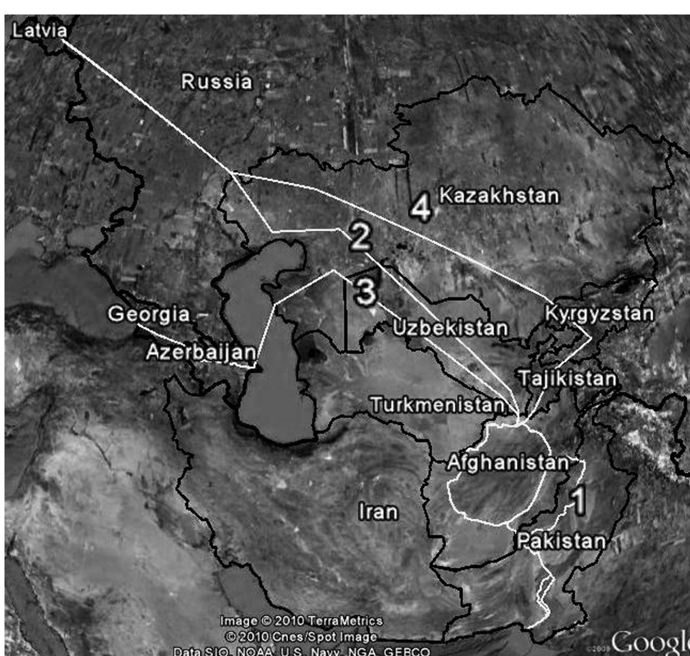
To sustain their growing forces in Afghanistan, the United States and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) must import a wide range of material into the country. Logistical support in Afghanistan is a national tasking, with each member of the coalition responsible for supplying its own armed forces. The bulk of U.S. supplies are routed through the Pakistani port of Karachi (route 1 in map 1) and enter Afghanistan via the Torkham Gate near Peshawar or the Chaman Gate in Baluchistan.[3] These shipments are handled entirely by commercial carriers and require no U.S. military presence.[4] In 2008, around 28,000 20-foot equivalent units (TEUs) traveled along these routes before reaching Afghanistan.[5]

As the Taliban insurgency in Pakistan has intensified, these critical supply lines have come under increasing harassment. For example, Baitullah Mehsud, the late leader of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, directly threatened this logistical pipeline, pledging that convoys would not be allowed to reach U.S. and NATO units in Afghanistan.[6] While Mehsud was unable to achieve this objective, militants forced the Pakistani government to stop Afghan-bound supply convoys seven times between September 2008 and March 2009.[7] In addition, Pakistani insurgents mounted attacks against trucking terminals, destroying more than 450 vehicles and containers in over a dozen attacks in Peshawar in the same period.[8]

While disruptive, the material lost from insurgent attacks was a fraction of what the United States successfully transported from Pakistan to Afghanistan. In March 2009, General Duncan J. McNabb, commander of the U.S. Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), stated that "about 130 to 140 shipments reach Afghanistan [via Pakistan] each day." At the time, force levels in Afghanistan required only 78 containers per day. Thus, the attrition along the Pakistani supply line was not severe enough to hamper the overall war effort.[9]

A lack of projected surplus capacity along the Pakistani routes in conjunction with ongoing insurgent attacks, pilferage, trucking strikes, and the exorbitant costs associated with airlifting supplies prompted the Unites States to search for new supply routes into the theater.[10] Ultimately, the United States opted for a series of routes that connected Baltic and Black Sea ports with Afghanistan. By the end of 2009, the United States had agreements in place with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan for the transport of nonmilitary supplies across their nations. These complemented transit agreements already signed with Georgia and Russia in 2005 and 2008 respectively.

Map 1: The NDN routes



Supply Routes Key:
1- Pakistan Route- Pakistan, Afghanistan
2- NDN North- Latvia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan
3- NDN South- Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan
4- KKT- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan

Today, the NDN involves three spurs. These are known as NDN North, NDN South, and KKT (routes 2–4, respectively, in map 1). NDN North begins at the Latvian port of Riga. From there, it uses existing Soviet-era rail lines to traverse Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Once in Uzbekistan, cargo enters Afghanistan at Termez. The NDN South transits the Caucasus and completely bypasses Russia. This route originates in the Georgian port of Poti on the Black Sea and crosses Azerbaijan before arriving in Baku. From there, goods are loaded onto ferries for their journey across the Caspian Sea. These supplies make landfall at Kazakhstan's west coast port of Aktau and then proceed to Uzbekistan before entering Afghanistan. If and when the United States secures a transit agreement from Turkmenistan, the port of Turkmenbashi could be an additional destination for goods leaving Baku by ferry. The KKT route includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. KKT provides a backup to the Uzbek border crossing at Termez. According to TRANSCOM, this route has some poorly constructed stretches of road in Tajikistan that limit throughput.[11]

From a purely logistical standpoint, the NDN is a resounding achievement, both in its genesis and in its continued viability and effectiveness. Interagency cooperation among CENTCOM, TRANSCOM, the Defense Logistics Agency, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Department of State, and others was sufficient to make the NDN an operational success. As a result, 300 TEUs are currently transiting the NDN per week, although at a cost of 250 percent more per TEU than supplies moving along the Pakistani line. The number of TEUs could easily be expanded to 500 per week, if needed.[12] As of November 2009, the NDN had brought 4,500 TEUs into Afghanistan.[13] This figure represents 12.5 percent of the total number of TEUs shipped through Pakistan in 2008 and is in addition to the supplies currently entering Afghanistan from Pakistan.

> **GDP across Central Asia could grow by 50 percent within a decade.**

While the creation of the NDN was motivated by the U.S. military's immediate logistical needs, its establishment nonetheless offers a unique opportunity for Washington to lay a foundation for a Modern Silk Road, which would help stabilize Afghanistan in the long term and transform Eurasia. By linking Afghanistan with Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia through commercial carriers, existing infrastructure, and multiple routes, the NDN demonstrates that the embattled country is currently accessible.

At the same time, the NDN is creating additional demand for transcontinental transport services, bolstering the logistical links between Afghanistan, NDN ports of origin, and NDN transit states. Through this demand, the U.S. military is helping to create and sustain transcontinental transport capacity that could one day service the Modern Silk Road and become the engine for Afghanistan's economic growth as prioritized in the 2008 Afghan National Development Strategy. The NDN's success also affirms that new infrastructure projects are not prerequisites to enhance Afghanistan's economic integration. While further development would certainly help, the fact that 4,500 TEUs have been delivered to Afghanistan via the NDN since February 2009 illustrates that goods can reach the country through commercial carriers along existing infrastructure.[14]

These deliveries, however, do not represent the full throughput capacity of these routes. TRANSCOM reports that it sees no infrastructure constraints in using the NDN to ship half its nonlethal ground shipments to Afghanistan in 2010.[15] The Asian Development Bank (ADB) also recognized the existence of surplus capacity within the Central Asian portion of the NDN, noting that after the "dramatic fall in traffic on the regional networks in the 1990s, there is undoubtedly abundant spare capacity on virtually the entire [road and rail] transport network."[16] The NDN is a striking reminder that transit corridors connecting Afghanistan with Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia are far more viable than many realize.

Perhaps most significantly, the NDN has focused the U.S. government on the onerous bureaucratic requirements and rampant corruption that serve as long-standing obstacles to the growth of the Modern Silk Road. The NDN provides an opportunity for the United States to identify and help regional states implement simpler and faster ways of moving goods safely from one country to another. While no policy will guarantee success, developing the Modern Silk Road to enhance economic integration between Afghanistan and its near and distant neighbors is one of the most promising ways to deepen Kabul's coffers. As the Afghan National Development Strategy points out, "Afghanistan cannot develop without access to regional and international markets."[17]

Achieving U.S. Objectives through the Modern Silk Road

Nobody has articulated the vision of the Modern Silk Road as well as Professor S. Frederick Starr of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University. In the foreword to his book on this subject released in 2007, a then-improving Afghanistan—in conjunction with the removal of Cold War borders and China's decision to open its western frontier to trade—laid the foundation for a transcontinental trading network spanning the entire Eurasian land mass.[18]

Reminiscent of the ancient Silk Road, which connected Europe and Asia, the Modern Silk Road could generate tremendous incomes among both trading and transit states. Starr offers five rough indicators of the scale and value of such commerce. First, an overland route running from Lianyungang in China to

Rotterdam in the Netherlands via Xinjiang and Central Asia would reduce the time it takes to transport goods from China to Europe from 20–40 days to about 11, and lower costs from $167 to $111 per ton, or by over 30 percent while cutting the time at least in half. Second, if basic improvements were to be made to the transportation infrastructure connecting Central Asia to Afghanistan, the ABD predicts overall trade would increase by up to $12 billion, a growth of 80 percent. Third, a separate estimate by the ADB found that completing new roads would boost total trade among Afghanistan's neighbors by 160 percent and increase the transit trade through Afghanistan by 113 percent. The study also found that these roads would raise Afghanistan's exports by 14 percent, or $5.8 billion, and increase imports by 16 percent or $6.7 billion. Fourth, a UN study estimated that the gross domestic product (GDP) across Central Asia would grow by 50 percent within a decade, if those states cooperate with one another on fostering trade. And finally, intercontinental trade is projected to increase GDP growth in Afghanistan by 8.8–12.7 percent and 2–3 percent in Xinjiang.[19]

> A Modern Silk Road would help the U.S. achieve its goals in Afghanistan.

Developing the Modern Silk Road would also have second- and third-order benefits that extend beyond economics. As Starr writes, "The prospect of transforming Afghanistan, and the entire region of which it is the heart, into a zone of secure sovereignties and viable market economies . . . can roll back the forces that give rise to extremism and enhance continental security."[20] In short, the Modern Silk Road could promote security, prosperity, and connectivity within some of the most volatile, impoverished, and isolated nations on the planet.

Its emergence would help the United States achieve its goals in Afghanistan in two different ways. First, the economic growth would help reduce the widespread deprivation that plays an important role in the Taliban insurgency. In Afghanistan, where 40 percent of the population is unemployed and 53 percent live below the poverty line, economic conditions directly affect the insurgency.[21] According to at least one estimate, as many as 70 percent of the Taliban are "unemployed young men just looking for a way to make a living."[22] While this figure may be debatable, several analysts have pointed to a connection between insurgency and deprivation in the region.

Karin von Hippel, former director of the CSIS Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project, argues, "The ordinary volunteer or recruit in Pakistan and Afghanistan has typically been poor."[23] To support this argument, she cited three compelling sources. First was a report by Daniel Markey from the Council on Foreign

Relations, which found that "in Pakistan, Taliban recruits are drawn from Afghan refugee camps and the network of extremist madrassas in the tribal areas. Taliban foot soldiers tend to be uneducated, poor Pashtuns with few other employment prospects."[24] Second was a study by the UN Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA), which stated that in the absence of employment opportunities, young men join militant groups as a way to earn a living and enhance their social status.[25] Finally, von Hippel cited renowned journalist Peter Bergen, who learned that Taliban fighters were paid about $300 a month, equivalent to four times the wage of an average Afghan police officer.[26]

The relationship between poverty and extremism in South Asia reinforces the idea that the Modern Silk Road must be developed, along with military operations, in Afghanistan as a vital component of an effective counterinsurgency campaign and a key ingredient for long-term stability. The principles of Obama's December 1, 2009 speech on Afghanistan recognize the relationship between economic growth and the counterinsurgency mission, stating that "growth is critical to undermine extremists' appeal in the short term and for sustainable economic development in the long term."[27]

The second reason why the emergence of the Modern Silk Road is important for U.S. goals in Afghanistan is that it would provide the Afghan government with a desperately needed revenue stream. While much of the current debate has focused on how to professionalize the Afghan National Security Forces and create a functional and legitimate Afghan government, these institutions will ultimately fail without a sustainable revenue stream to fund them. With international assistance currently accounting for "around 90% of all public expenditures" in Afghanistan, it is clear that more must be done to enhance the ability of the Afghan government to sustain itself.[28] This is where the NDN comes in. Despite being created to serve logistical ends, the NDN is bringing about a de facto step toward the Modern Silk Road. The U.S. government should embrace this positive externality and strive to deepen Afghanistan's connections to regional and global markets.

Misconceptions Surrounding the Modern Silk Road

While the Modern Silk Road represents the best hope for the long-term stabilization of Afghanistan and the NDN offers a unique opportunity to help bring about its emergence, there are two common misconceptions: namely, that poor infrastructure and a lack of security are responsible for Afghanistan's current economic isolation and the failure of the Silk Road to reemerge. This analysis, however, is flawed.

First, with some notable exceptions, transportation infrastructure in several portions of Eurasia is underdeveloped. This infrastructure deficit is, in fact, acute within Afghanistan and between Afghanistan and its neighbors. That said, these conditions are not responsible for the lack of commercial activity in undeveloped parts of Eurasia, and adequate infrastructure does exist to support increased levels of trade in these locations.

While donors such as the ADB are beginning to address this deficit through projects like the recently approved rail line connecting Termez with Mazar-e-Sharif, the present reality is nonetheless apparent. Yet, according to the International Road Transport Union (IRU), “The road network in transit countries [to Afghanistan] has sufficient reserves of capacity to allow for the mass expansion of cargo shipments.”[29] In other words, roads can be used rather than rail. As the success of the NDN suggests, the current regional infrastructure does provide functional and adequate conduits through which current commercial volumes can reach Afghanistan.

> Regional development is receiving too little attention from the Obama administration.

As for insecurity, there is no doubt that sustained violence in Afghanistan—as well as areas like Baluchistan, Kashmir, and other parts of Eurasia—inhibits economic activity and dissuades private and public investment which could help foster regional trade and growth. As the scope and intensity of the Taliban insurgency expands, this inhibitor is growing more acute. Yet, the continuing flow of Pakistani trucks ferrying NATO supplies from Karachi to Afghanistan through the epicenter of the Pashtun insurgency is proof that commercial activity can flourish amid instability. Any gains that militants would make from disrupting these vital supply lines on a strategic level are outweighed by the fact that local tribes derive significant income from this traffic. As long as such incentive structures hold, local populations will prioritize commerce over political violence.

The Real Challenges

If a lack of adequate infrastructure and insecurity are not preventing the emergence of a Modern Silk Road, what exactly is? Among others, a low priority, inefficient bureaucratic practices, lack of coordination among donors and governments, corruption, and geopolitical schisms help explain why the Modern Silk Road currently remains elusive.

Low Priority

Regional development is receiving too little attention from the Obama administration compared to other, more immediate regional challenges. By focusing so intensely on the conduct of war in Afghanistan and lacking a broader regional strategy to promote Afghanistan’s economic growth, Washington is setting itself up for failure. On January 21, 2010, the Department of State released a new document outlining U.S. strategy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. While the report does indicate that the Obama administration has made economic development a higher priority than its predecessors, in our view the strategy still remains deficient in addressing roles of other key regional players and ignores the importance of Afghanistan's role as a transit and trade hub as essential for its long-term economic viability.[30]

The administration has identified agricultural development as a priority, for example, but it has not adequately thought through how those goods will reach domestic and international markets, making the strategy incomplete.

Inefficient Bureaucratic Practices

Throughout our consultations, interlocutors unanimously identified inefficient bureaucratic practices as the biggest obstacle to transcontinental trade. A survey conducted by the ADB of nearly 1,000 continental truck drivers from various countries hauling goods across Afghanistan supports this assessment, with 90 percent pointing to the bureaucracy at borders as the greatest impediment to trade. A study by the IRU argued that, aside from the delays and lack of excess capacity associated with the ferry crossings over the Caspian Sea, bureaucratic difficulties were the "principal problems" that may arise during the implementation of possible road routes to Afghanistan.[31]

According to the IRU, the majority of these bureaucratic obstacles have more to do with relations between transit countries than economic factors. In Central Asia, for example, disagreements over water use, payment for natural gas and electricity, militant incursions, the status of ethnic minorities, and espionage have contributed to the uneasy relationships largely responsible for these barriers. As such, the abundance of border crossings involved in transcontinental trade creates significant inefficiencies. As the IRU's New Euroasian Land Transport Initiative project found, border crossings create delays that account for up to 40 percent of the total travel time between Europe and Asia and about a third of freight charges. The cumulative effect of these delays is quite significant. The ADB reports that transportation costs may represent 50 percent of the price of nationally produced goods in Kyrgyzstan.[32] This impact is also evident in the cost of transporting heating oil from a refinery in southern Kyrgyzstan to the north of the country. As a result of the Soviet system, oil traveling from one end of Kyrgyzstan to the other must pass through Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, increasing its price, according to the ADB, from $50 per barrel at the refinery to $90 per barrel at its destination.

The official difficulties at borders are further exacerbated by corruption. The IRU notes that "corruption is apparent mostly at border crossing points and involves customs, sanitary, phyto-sanitary, and other formalities." Within Central

Asia, unofficial costs at borders exacted through bribes and facilitating payments are several times higher than official duties.[33]

The administration must recognize that the Modern Silk Road will benefit all of Eurasia.

Borders, however, do not cause all the bureaucratic obstacles to transcontinental trade. Disparate regulations across regional states make for a highly convoluted and inefficient transcontinental transport sector. For example, a survey of international road haulage and simplification of transit regulations between Georgia and China shows that there are more than 20 bilateral and 7 multilateral agreements in force—many of which have not been ratified or are not functional.[34] A lack of unified transit and road safety controls compounds these challenges.

Lack of Coordination among Donors and Governments

Donors' efforts in Afghanistan and surrounding regions have been almost exclusively ad hoc and defined by national interests. In Afghanistan, for instance, a formal national development strategy to coordinate foreign aid was not created until 2006, five years after the initial U.S. invasion. Similarly, only in 2008 did the UNAMA make greater coordination of national and multilateral assistance efforts a serious priority.[35] Even within the U.S. government itself, the cross-cutting set of challenges associated with regional development often results in disjointed policies across civilian and military agencies. This lack of coordination leads to duplicative efforts, inadequate synergy across projects, and a piecemeal approach to what should be a strategic and well-conceived undertaking.

Corruption

The viability of the Modern Silk Road is contingent on regional governments' addressing the bureaucratic practices discussed earlier and creating the urgently needed legal and procedural framework for efficient commerce. Such reform, however, will have little impact unless official corruption can be reduced. The regulations and procedures outlined earlier provide corrupt officials with ample opportunity to shake down unwary traders, making these unscrupulous individuals supporters of the status quo. Concerns about corruption also discourage donors and private interests from investing in the region.

Geopolitical Schisms

To join East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Europe in a networked economy through the Modern Silk Road would require linking several states with complex and often contentious bilateral relationships.

While the concept stands to benefit all involved—akin to a "Eurasian globalization"—some of these states view international relations in zero-sum terms. Such thinking is yet another barrier to the Modern Silk Road. Changing this mindset is no easy task and will require a robust outreach campaign to help convince tentative partners and skeptical rivals.

The Road to Regional Transformation

Achieving the Modern Silk Road is as much a challenge as it is a requirement for long-term success in Afghanistan. The U.S. government, in close consultation with regional players, must formulate practical policies to help tear down the obstacles outlined above and lay the groundwork for regional development and for the sustainable Afghan economy it would help create. Specifically, the U.S. government should focus on eight actions.

First, the U.S. government should recognize the potential benefits of a Modern Silk Road and make its implementation a strategic priority. This effort should be linked with the unique opportunity created by the NDN.

Second, the administration should create a long-term strategy for the Modern Silk Road's development where trade with Afghanistan is the foundation for this approach.

Third, to be successful, the United States must work with regional governments, donors, and other stakeholders in a coordinated manner. To build momentum for this engagement, the United States should undertake a comprehensive communications campaign that generates incentives to invest into the Silk Road concept.

Fourth, while many U.S. government entities have an important role to play in the creation of the Modern Silk Road, a single coordinating body is necessary. This entity should be explicitly identified and empowered by the administration. The National Security Council is the likely organization for this task, and should undertake this effort as a high presidential priority in conjunction with other policies intended to promote long-term stabilization of Afghanistan.[36]

Fifth, even though the NDN has served as an incremental step toward regional integration, U.S. planners should seek access to additional corridors into Afghanistan. These include the following routes from Iran–Afghanistan (beginning in the Iranian port of Chabahar and entering Afghanistan at the border town of Zaranj before continuing to the Afghan ring road at Delaram), China–Central Asia–Afghanistan (originating in China's Pacific ports and traveling via road and rail lines before entering Afghanistan), China–Pakistan–Afghanistan (beginning in China's Pacific ports and transiting the Karakorum highway in Pakistan), Pakistan–Afghanistan (beginning at the Pakistani port of Gwadar and transiting Baluchistan before entering Afghanistan), and India–

Pakistan–Afghanistan. While the challenges associated with these routes are apparent, the United States should put forth a concerted effort to gain access to them. (After all, who could have predicted that U.S. military supplies would be traversing Russia and Uzbekistan?) If the United States proves unable to make use of these routes, Washington should encourage and facilitate other Afghan-bound traffic to travel on them. Increasing intercontinental transport through these corridors is critical.

Sixth, the United States and other stakeholders should partner with local governments to tear down the bureaucratic obstacles to trade outlined earlier. To accomplish this critical task, U.S. officials and other donors must demonstrate the value of such reform and provide financial and technical assistance in a manner that does not encroach on the sovereignty of these states. This initiative should be fully resourced and include development of streamlined, efficient, and more corruption-resistant procedures, especially at border crossings.[37] Moreover, a determined effort should be made to coordinate existing aid programs designed to achieve the same result.

Seventh, an increase in legal cross-border commerce will not help stabilize Afghanistan unless the country develops the capacity to levy official taxes on trade and turn this activity into sustainable income. The United States, Japan, and other donors should work with the Afghan government to build this capability in a manner that marginalizes the informal economy and discourages official corruption.

Without development, everything the U.S. will have achieved in Afghanistan will be short-lived.

And finally, the Obama administration must recognize that the Modern Silk Road will benefit all of Eurasia. Geopolitical competition in Eurasia is often seen in zero-sum terms. As a result, a strong U.S. push will likely be misconstrued as an effort to assert some sort of advantage over other regional players. Washington should be attuned to this inevitability and be prepared to articulate how the initiative will benefit partners and rivals alike. If this aspect is ignored, potential spoilers will be more likely.

The NDN has provided the United States a unique, yet fleeting opportunity to develop the Modern Silk Road. In the end, if the opportunity offered by the Modern Silk Road is ignored, everything the United States will have achieved in Afghanistan will be short-lived, and instability will likely remain a permanent fixture in the heart of Eurasia.

Notes

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2. See Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas M. Sanderson, *The Northern Distribution Network and the Modern Silk Road* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, December 2009), http://csis.org/files/publication/091217_Kuchins_NorthernDistNet_Web.pdf.
3. The United States does provide logistical assistance to smaller coalition partners as well as the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Policy. CSIS interview with U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), MacDill Air Force Base, Tampa, Florida, May 20, 2009 (hereinafter CSIS interview with CENTCOM).
4. PowerPoint presentation from the U.S. Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), October 2, 2009 (hereinafter PowerPoint presentation, TRANSCOM).
5. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines a TEU as the "standard unit for counting containers of various capacities and for describing the capacities of container ships or terminals. One 20 foot (International Organization for Standardization [ISO]) container equals 1 TEU." See OECD, "Glossary of Statistical Terms," June 19, 2002, http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=4313. Thus, 28,000 TEUs represent the volume of cargo that would fit in 28,000 20-foot ISO shipping containers. The 28,000 figure comes from the CSIS interview with CENTCOM.
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12. Phone interview with TRANSCOM and CENTCOM; interview with a senior Department of Defense official, Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia, December 3, 2009.
13. PowerPoint presentation, TRANSCOM.
14. Figure from senior Department of Defense official, November 2009.
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36. Phase II of our study addresses, in part, how to organize the U.S. government for implementing this strategy. At this point, we unfortunately can not offer a detailed explanation of how and where this organization might be carried out. Preliminary interviews only indicate that either the U.S. Department of State or National Security Council would be the likely coordinator.
37. Phase III of the study will address, among other impediments, widespread corruption and develop recommendations on corruption-resistant procedures.