



TRANSPORT FRAGMENTATION AND STATE PERIPHERALIZATION IN AFGHANISTAN: A WORLD-SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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Annotation: The paper examines Afghanistan's transport system through the lens of world-systems theory, focusing on how limited connectivity between Kabul and peripheral regions contributes to internal fragmentation. Weak infrastructure integration not only constrains economic development but also reinforces political instability and dependence on external actors. The study argues that Afghanistan's peripheral status is reproduced not only at the global level but also within its domestic spatial structure.

Keywords: Afghanistan; transport infrastructure; world-systems theory; spatial fragmentation; regional connectivity; peripheralization; political instability.

Introduction

In the era of globalization, when the integration of transport networks was widely regarded as a key driver of economic growth in developing countries, Afghanistan remained largely on the periphery of these processes. This marginal position can be explained by the fact that, over recent decades, the country has endured prolonged periods of conflict, which have significantly distorted its development trajectory, effectively turning it into a kind of "black hole" within the global transport system.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on world-systems theory to conceptualize Afghanistan's position within the global economy as structurally peripheral, characterized by weak integration into transnational economic networks. While the theory traditionally focuses on the external hierarchy between core and periphery, this paper applies it to the domestic level, arguing that limited transport connectivity between Kabul and peripheral regions reproduces similar patterns of fragmentation within the state. In this context, infrastructure is treated not merely as an economic asset, but as a spatial mechanism shaping both state cohesion and dependency on external actors.

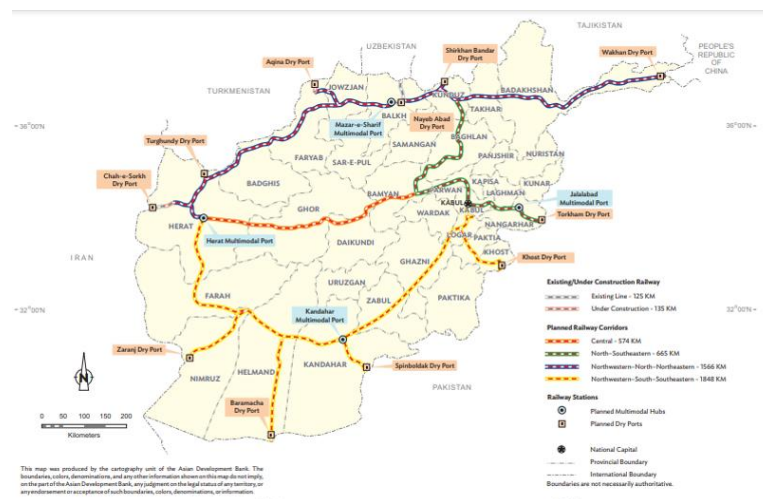
Transport Infrastructure in Afghanistan

Railway development and regional corridors

Following the U.S. intervention and the establishment of a new political order, Afghanistan's transport sector entered a period that was widely perceived as a window of opportunity for reconstruction and integration into regional transport networks. According to a U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, Western countries and international donors allocated more than \$2.2 billion to infrastructure development. In the initial phase (2002–2003), the Kabul–Kandahar–Herat ring road was reconstructed, contributing to an increase in freight traffic, which was projected to reach 23.7 million ton-kilometers by 2008 (GAO, 2007).

Subsequently, the signing of the agreement on the ambitious TAPI project in 2010 envisaging the annual transportation of 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas raised expectations for Afghanistan's integration into South Asian energy markets (Cutler, 2011). Another notable development of that period was the construction of the 75-kilometer Hairatan–Mazar-i-Sharif railway line, which today provides Uzbekistan with a strategic advantage in controlling freight flows in the Afghan direction (Umarova, 2024).

Despite these ambitious initiatives, Afghanistan's railway infrastructure remained highly fragmented. In this context, the National Railway Plan (ANRP), developed under the Karzai administration in 2013, represented an attempt to establish a coherent system. The plan envisaged the creation of a circular railway network bypassing the Hindu Kush mountain range to connect with neighboring countries, as well as the construction of eight dry ports and four multimodal logistics hubs (Kashifi, 2022) (see Fig. 1).



However, the implementation of the ANRP faced a number of serious constraints. First, the estimated cost of the project amounting to \$19.4 billion as of 2018 and comparable to Afghanistan's GDP—underscored its heavy dependence on external donor financing. Second, technical barriers, including differing railway gauges among neighboring countries (1,520 mm in CIS states, 1,676 mm in Pakistan, and 1,435 mm in Iran), created additional complications and increased transshipment costs (Kashifi, 2022). Third, limited freight volumes, partly due to the need for local

processing of extracted raw materials to reduce logistics costs further constrained viability. Finally, persistent security and governance risks continued to deter investment.

Under these conditions, a phased approach focused on priority corridors appeared to be the most pragmatic strategy. In particular, a flagship route linking the northern and eastern regions of the country with the rapidly growing markets of South Asia where annual GDP growth reaches up to 7.5% was seen as critical for enhancing Afghanistan's economic competitiveness (World Bank, 2024). Moreover, as outlined in the National Development Strategy adopted in 2008, efficient transport infrastructure is essential for national development, with railways playing a central role in enabling large-scale mining projects aimed at export (Pleis et al., 2014).

Current initiatives and risks (2017–2025)

A new phase of railway development initiatives began in 2017, when Afghanistan and Uzbekistan signed a cooperation agreement on transport, including the extension of the railway line from Mazar-i-Sharif through Herat to Khaf in Iran. However, by 2018, attention had shifted toward the shortest and more commercially viable direction, leading to increased focus on the so-called Kabul Corridor, providing access to the ports of Gwadar and Karachi (ISSI, 2018).

At the same time, within the framework of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Tajikistan corridor, construction of the 30-kilometer Akina–Andkhoy section was launched in 2019 with support from the Asian Development Bank (Railway Gazette International, 2021). In parallel, fieldwork began on the fourth section of the Khaf–Herat railway line, spanning 225 kilometers and designed with a capacity of up to 12 million tons annually (Railway Technology, 2020). By March of 2025, the first export shipment to Europe via this route had been recorded, demonstrating the growing potential of the corridor (Ariana News, 2025). The Akina–Andkhoy segment, opened in January 2021, is now used for both containerized and general cargo (Cuenca, 2021).

In February 2021, within the framework of the Kabul Corridor, the parties approved a roadmap for construction during negotiations in Tashkent. According to the plan, the feasibility study and route selection were to be completed by May 2021, with construction scheduled to begin by September of the same year. However, the evolving political situation in Afghanistan led to delays in implementation (Gazeta.uz, 2021).

Nevertheless, following the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the new government formed by the Taliban signaled its interest in continuing regional connectivity projects and confirmed its readiness to honor previously reached agreements on the Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan railway initiative. In 2023–2024, negotiations on the construction of the Kabul corridor were

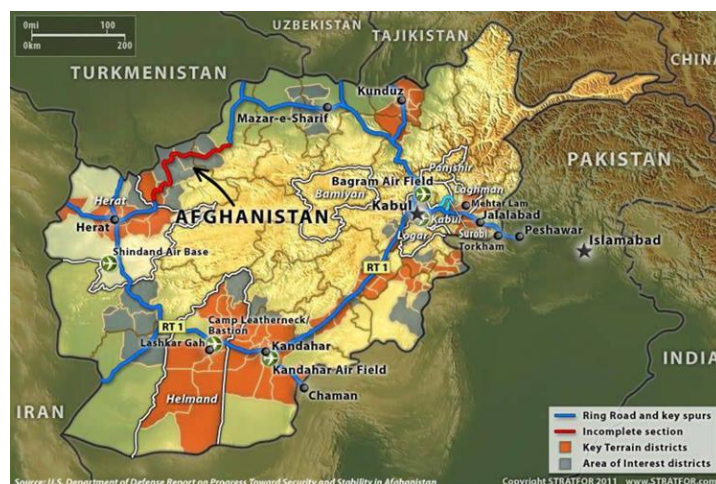
intensified, alongside progress on other routes, including Khaf–Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif–Herat, and Herat–Kandahar, as well as the ongoing operation of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor.

Despite this renewed momentum, significant technical and financial challenges persist. First, the predominantly mountainous terrain along much of the proposed routes, combined with incompatible railway gauges, necessitates advanced engineering solutions and substantially increases project costs. Second, security risks remain a critical concern. For instance, the Torkham border crossing an essential node within the Kabul Corridor has been repeatedly closed due to clashes between Pakistani and Afghan security forces (Omarova, 2025). In addition, the presence of ISIS-K, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, and other militant groups continues to disrupt trade flows, posing risks of attacks and sabotage along transport routes.

Third, despite the interest shown by regional states and Gulf countries, the scale of required investment remains considerable. Much will depend on the willingness of international financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) to provide financing for these projects.

Road infrastructure and AH1

Given the limited development of the railway network, road transport currently plays a central role in Afghanistan's transport system. In this context, the country's national Ring Road (AH1), with a total length of approximately 3,360 kilometers and linking 16 provinces, represents a critical infrastructure project of strategic importance for both economic development and regional integration (Schachter, 2013). However, as of 2026, the project remains incomplete. The main bottlenecks are concentrated in the northwestern region, where approximately 151 kilometers between Qaisar in Faryab Province and Dar-e Bum in Badghis Province have yet to be completed (see Fig. 2).





Key national highways forming segments of AH1 include the Jalalabad–Kabul Road, which runs through a river gorge and is considered one of the most dangerous routes due to its narrow sections; the Kabul–Kandahar highway, linking the country’s two largest urban centers; the Kandahar–Delaram–Herat corridor, providing connectivity to western regions; and the Herat–Islam Qala road, leading to the Iranian border. Beyond the Ring Road and its primary branches, other important routes include the Delaram–Zaranj highway, which provides access to the port of Chabahar, as well as the Salang Pass route, which remains the only direct corridor through the Hindu Kush mountain range (Mrunal, 2012).

Despite the incomplete status of the AH1 project, construction and rehabilitation efforts are ongoing. The Afghan Ministry of Public Works reported that in 2024, 85 out of 109 road repair and maintenance projects were completed (TOLO News, 2024). Plans for 2026 include the construction of an additional 300 kilometers of roads, including strategically significant sections such as Dasht-e Archi–Kunduz and Kandahar–Spin Boldak (Xinhua, 2026). Progress has also been observed on the Qaisar–Laman section, with an agreement signed in February of this year for the construction of a 25-kilometer segment. To accelerate implementation and ensure security in more volatile western regions such as Badghis, authorities plan to employ up to 2,000 local residents to safeguard construction activities (Siyar, 2025). Despite the existing challenges, the presence of approved plans and allocated funding suggests that the project could be completed within the coming years.

Conclusion

Thus, the overall configuration of Afghanistan’s road network can be interpreted through the lens of Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory. In this framework, the absence of an effective transport network linking the core represented by Kabul with peripheral regions generates conditions conducive to fragmentation, instability, and increased dependence on external actors (Kardulias, 2008).

Isolation from the center weakens state governance and reduces control over peripheral territories, thereby creating fertile ground for separatist tendencies, the growing influence of local warlords, and the expansion of transnational terrorist groups.

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