

I believe these initiatives have the potential to transform the region and revive the spirit of the ancient Silk Road, in which Afghanistan and Pakistan were a confluence of trade and logistics.

I believe that we share a lot of culture and regional and religious integration, and I hope and believe,

from what I've seen, in regional stability and peace; and through an integrated approach, we can really give peace the kind of chance that it needs, and make this region stable, and the world a better place to live.

Thank you very much.

Hussein Askary

Put Afghanistan on the Belt and Road to Peace

Hussein Askary is Southwest Asia coordinator for the Schiller Institute. This is an edited transcript of his presentation to the July 31, 2021 Schiller Institute conference, "Afghanistan: A Turning Point in History After the Failed Regime-Change Era." Subheads have been added.



Schiller Institute

Hussein Askary

My presentation is titled, "Put Afghanistan on the Belt and Road to Peace," because I believe that the quickest way to start the reconstruction of Afghanistan, and to achieve peace and stability in and around the country, is through economic development. This can be reached through integration with the already available Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

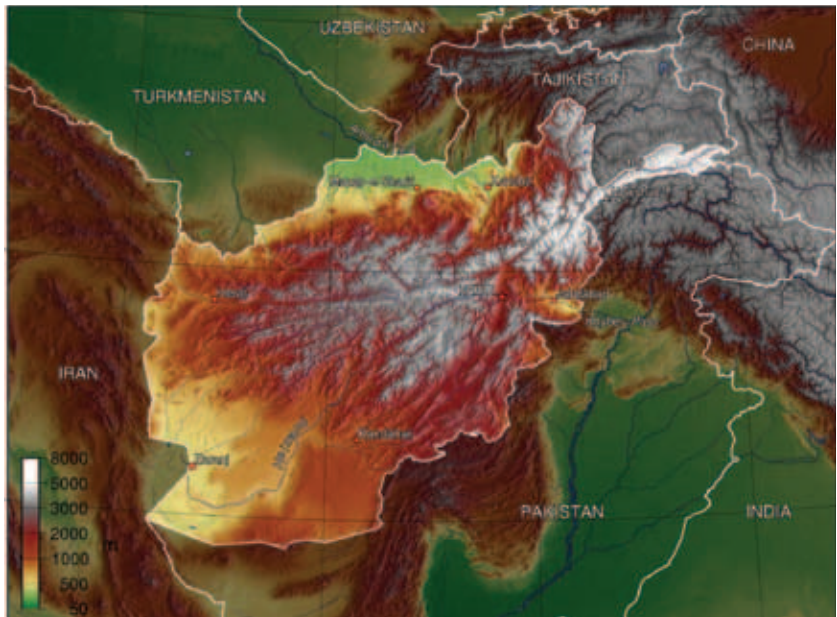
The government of Afghanistan, even while under U.S. and NATO influence, formally joined the BRI in 2016, signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Chinese Foreign Ministry. In 2017 Afghanistan joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is an offshoot of the Belt and Road Initiative. While the Taliban were not part of this process, in the meeting of their representative with the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Tianjin this week, he called on the Chinese side to contribute to the reconstruction of the Afghan economy. So, there is a consensus among the rival forces in Afghanistan, at least on this point. But, this is a very, very important point.

China, which is the world's largest in-

frastructure builder and financier, has shown a clear willingness to do that in both statements and actions in discussions with the Afghanistan representatives and their neighbors. There are clear mechanisms that are already in place all around Afghanistan, but never affected that country, due to the failed policy of the war on terrorism, but that failed policy can now be replaced with a new one, as Helga Zepp-LaRouche said in her keynote [presentation](#) to this conference.

Interestingly, the BRI was included in the United Nations mission to Afghanistan after 2001, and in Article 34 of the 2017 United Nations Security Council Resolution #2344.

FIGURE 1
Topographical Map of Afghanistan



Realities on the Ground

Now, let's first take a look at the realities on the ground in Afghanistan and around Afghanistan. **Figure 1** is a topographical map of Afghanistan, which shows the mountainous areas, and it's clearly a very rough mountainous country, which the British Empire used as a buffer zone against the Russian Empire. And that's why we have these borders and also this mountain area. The long arm, which stretches all the way to China in the Hindu Kush mountains, outlined the borders of Central Asia and South Asia for the British colonies.

Just take a look at the countries around it, because we've got to discuss them. Afghanistan has borders with China, although this is a tough terrain; with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Pakistan. There are many different ethnic groups like Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Persians, and Baluch and the Pash-tuns who share the territory in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

So, this is quite an interesting mixture, which has been used to foment strife and civil wars since the British set their feet into this area in the 18th Century. But this can be turned around into a new situation where instead of being a buffer zone and a danger to its neighbors, Afghanistan can become a bridge between Central Asia and South Asia, and between east and west.

Figure 2 shows the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members, which organization is, in my view, a very suitable forum for discussing not only security issues, but also the economic reconstruction and cooperation around Afghanistan, because it includes at least three of the major four powers which Lyndon LaRouche talked about—Russia, China, and India—and of course, the United States being the fourth power.

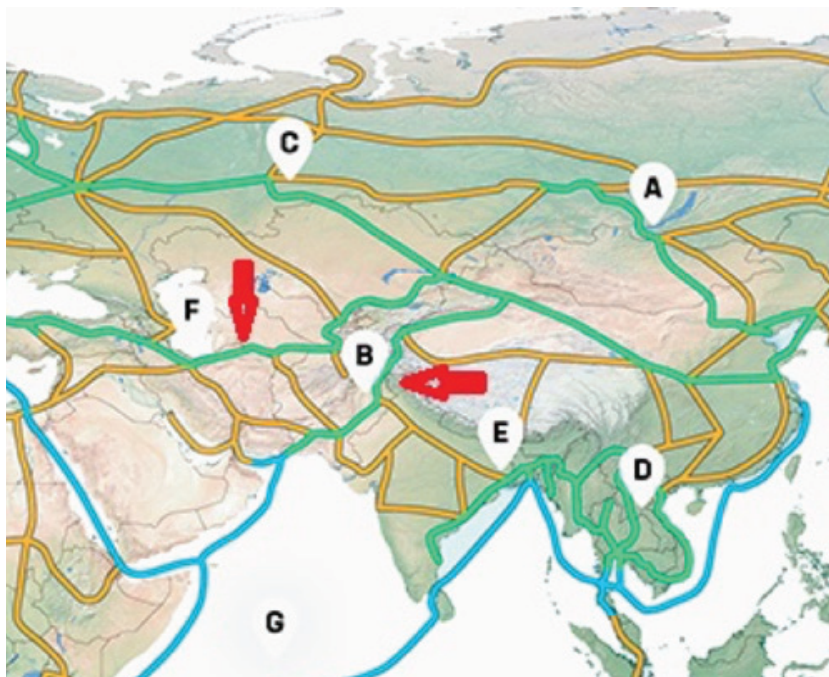
All the neighbors of Afghanistan are in this constellation, except for Turkmenistan, which has a neutrality principle. Afghanistan and Iran are observers in this. But most interestingly, India and Pakistan, who are geopolitical rivals, are also members in this dialogue. And India has shown interest in cooperating with the other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to resolve the

FIGURE 2
The SCO Member Nations



SCO
The Shanghai Cooperation Organization comprises almost half of the world's population. Member nations are in dark green, Observer nations in light green, and Dialogue Partners in yellow.

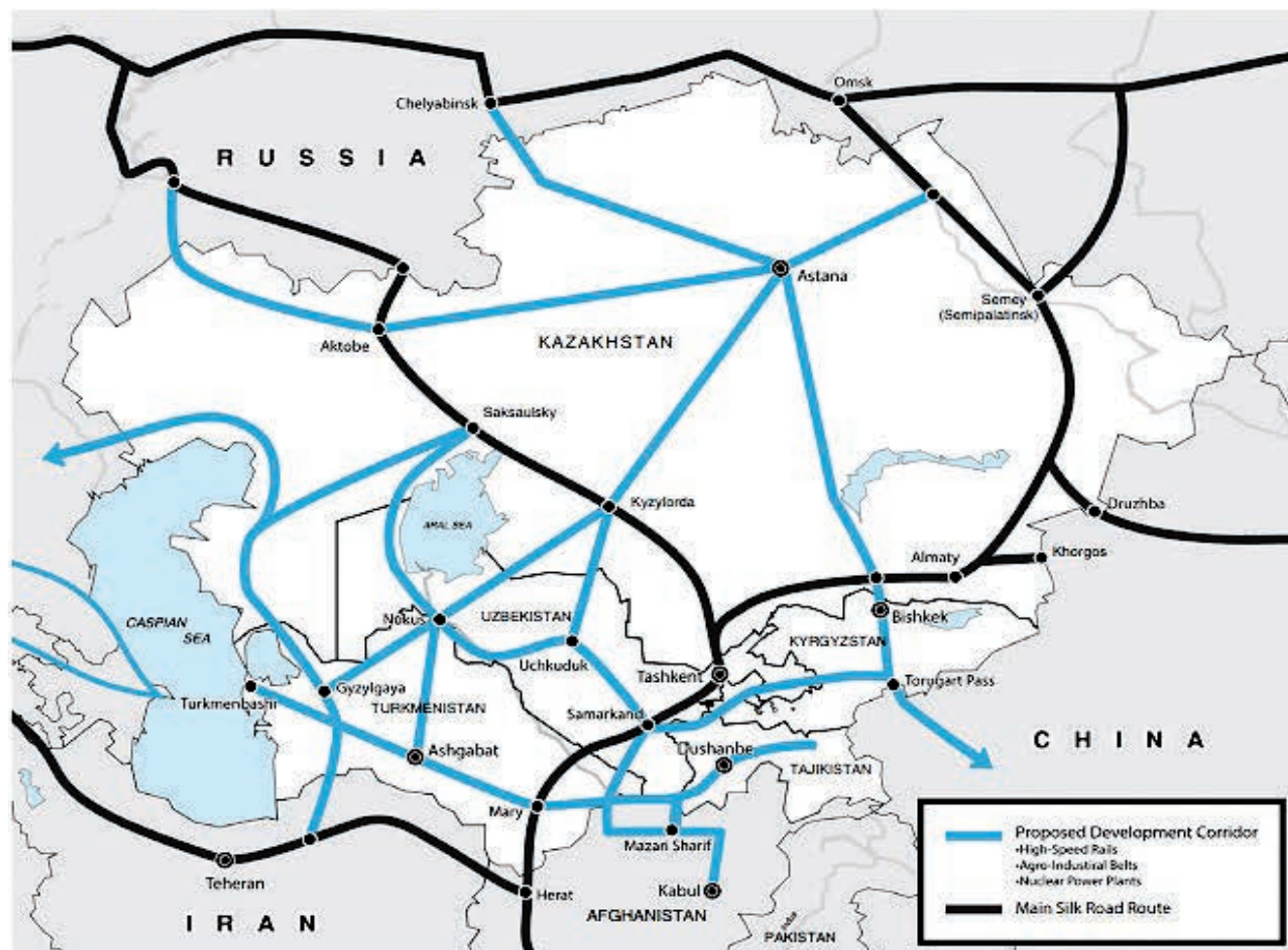
FIGURE 3
Integration of Afghanistan into the BRI



BRI
Afghanistan is embraced by—and can be connected to—two of the most important corridors of the Belt and Road, indicated by red arrows: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, labeled B, and the China-Central Asia-West Asia route, labeled E. Proposed routes, in yellow, that cross Afghanistan show how it could be done.

FIGURE 4

Central Asia—Silk Road Rail Lines and Proposed Regional Development Corridors



Ramtanu Maitra, Asuka Saito/EIR 2014

In addition to the Trans-Eurasia rail routes of the Silk Road crossing Central Asia, these nations require the development of their own regional rail network, for which key segments are shown here schematically. Some are under way, planned, or intended.

situation in Afghanistan. So, there is no more rivalry, we hope. But with the economic plans we are discussing, all these nations can work together instead of working against each other.

Many Development Proposals

Afghanistan is also situated between two of the six main corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative. (See **Figure 3**.) There are two main Belt and Road corridors that are adjacent to Afghanistan. Running east and south of Afghanistan is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which reaches through Pakistan into the Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea. The China-Central Asia-Iran-Turkey corridor runs north of Afghanistan. All these other lines are our proposals to connect these

different sections. But Afghanistan has not yet been affected by this process that has been ongoing for 10 years.

We in the Schiller Institute under the guidance of Lyndon LaRouche and Helga Zepp-LaRouche, who commissioned a special report in 2014, immediately after President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 proposed these extended corridors. We, our team, put together the [special report](#). It’s been translated into several languages now, including Arabic, which I did, and Chinese.

In that report, in the chapter on Central Asia, “From Arc of Crisis to Corridors of Development” (See **Figure 4**), we proposed to replace geopolitics with geo-economics, and to build development corridors throughout

FIGURE 5, 6

Existing and Proposed Railways



Details of existing (black) and proposed (orange) railroads for the Central Asia–Afghanistan–Pakistan sections of the Indo-Siberian north-south corridor.

Central Asia, into Afghanistan and into the Indian sub-continent.

In that same chapter, we have an appendix called “The Industrial Development of Afghanistan and Central Asia, a Russian Vision.” It was earlier presented by an institute, called the Institute for Demography, Migration and Regional Development, an NGO based in Moscow.

This idea was the plan for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, which was supposed to be presented to the G-8 summit in Sochi in Russia in June 2014. And there was a lot of support for that, including from Viktor Ivanov, who was the Russian anti-drug czar, who Mr. Arlacchi mentioned during this conference. The idea was to fight the opium war in Afghanistan with economic development. But this plan was never presented

to the G8 summit because of the coup in Ukraine, and then Russia consequently being removed from the Group of Eight. And so the plan was never discussed or implemented.

Young Population

In that plan, were several development corridors from Central Asia into Afghanistan and Pakistan. (See **Figures 5 and 6.**) You can find all the details in that appendix. But the important thing, that which we always look at, as we have learned physical economics from Mr. Lyndon LaRouche, is the question of the population. Human beings are the most important source of wealth in any nation, and then come the other natural resources. And it’s a fascinating picture, as shown in **Figure 7.**

First of all, the concentration of the population in Afghanistan is to the south and to the north of this mountain barrier, so to speak. So,

FIGURE 7
Population Density, 2000

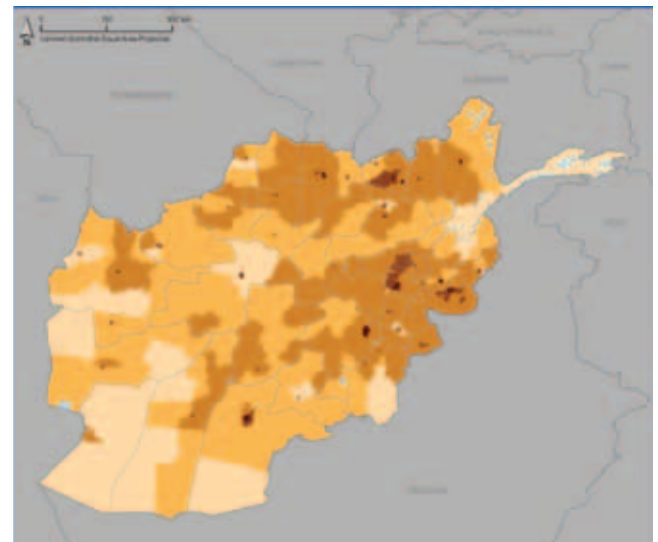
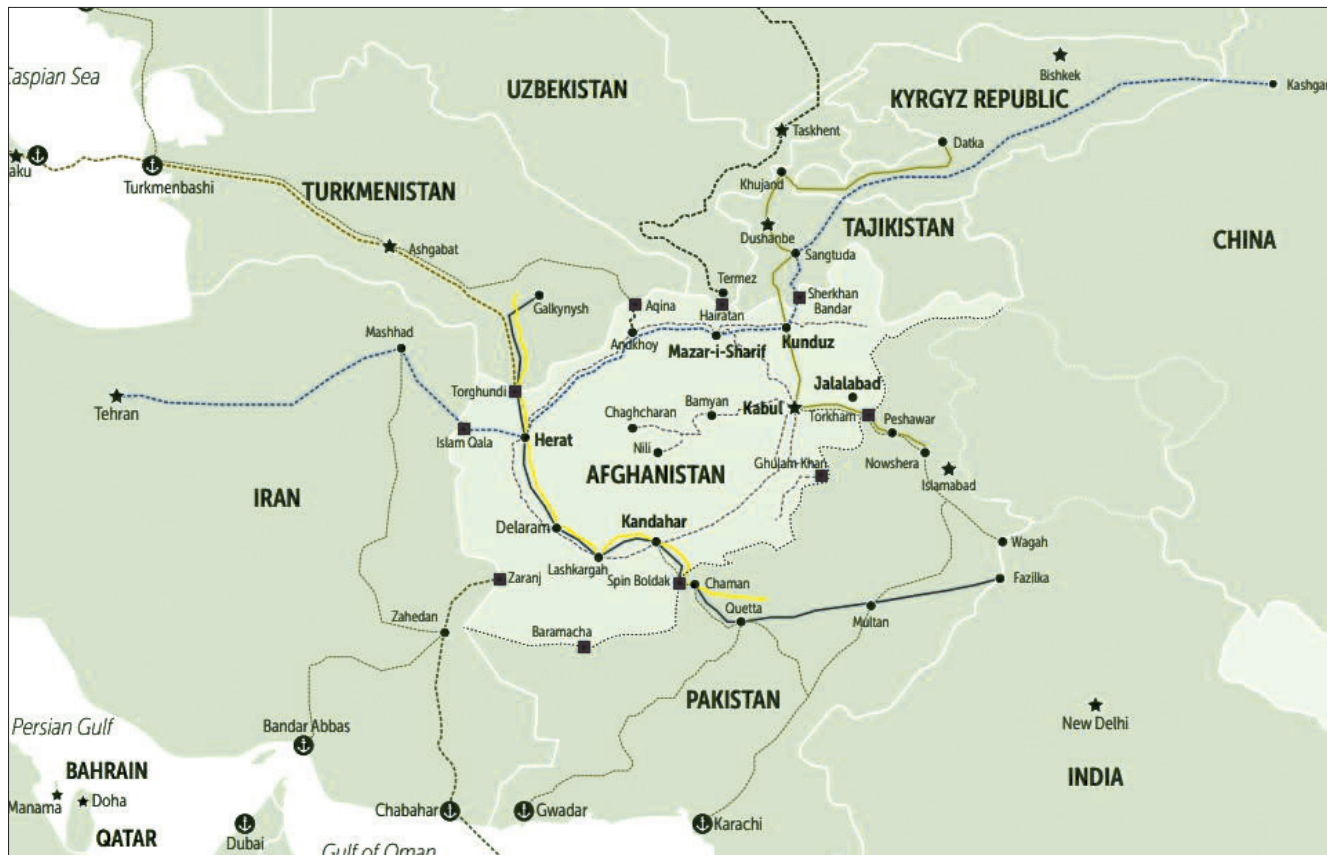


FIGURE 8



Afghan Foreign Ministry/RECCA

The Ring around Afghanistan railroad, shown here as a dotted line, is one of the promising projects outlined by the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA). At present, there is a Ring around Afghanistan highway, but not a ring railroad.

this has to be bridged through development corridors, so you can connect all the different groups of Afghani population and resources—both water and other resources—together, to create one economic unit. And also to connect it to the surrounding nations, to create an even larger economic unit.

The population of Afghanistan is 37 million people, including three million refugees, mostly in Iran and Pakistan. But the amazing factor is that 46% of the population of Afghanistan are below the age of 15 years. And only 2.5% of the population of Afghanistan are above the age of 65. So, we have around 80% of the Afghani people are below 30 years of age, which is a very, very young population. And of course, it has enormous aspirations and demands. This population of 37 million is projected to double by 2050.

So, there is need for massive investment in infrastructure, which is the transport, power, water, education, and health care. By investing in this infrastructure,

we can help increase their productivity so they can sustain their own economy, and not be reliant simply on aid from outside. What the initial support through the Belt and Road should be, is for the reconstruction of the infrastructure of Afghanistan to enable all those millions of young Afghanis to increase their productivity and utilize the natural resources and land to gain profitability and be able to participate in international trade.

A Multi-Connected Manifold

There have been multiple plans and discussions, as I said, from Russia. But also, we now have a domestic Afghanistan plan for integrating Afghanistan into its surroundings, but also integrating Afghanistan's different parts together. This was presented by the "Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan," the RECCA, which is supported by the Afghanistan Foreign Ministry. (See **Figure 8**.) I have adapted a map produced by RECCA, adding certain wider elements of

the Belt and Road. To the south of Afghanistan, is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Then we have the New Silk Road from Iran to Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and so forth.

So, the plan is to build a number of development corridors for transport, power, and oil and gas. Now there are a number of the projects outlined by the RECCA. One of them is the CASA-1000, the Central Asia South Asia regional electricity market. Because you have certain surplus in certain countries, certain parts of the year due to weather, different conditions, and hydropower availability, like in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, which can be exported. Turkmenistan is a natural gas-rich country. Iran is a natural gas-rich country and so forth.

And Afghanistan is actually dependent on its neighbor countries to provide its electricity, which has not been built in the past 20 years. So, this CASA-1000 includes Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan as one electric grid. The TAP-500, another electric power line connecting Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan. There is the TAPI, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline, which was backed allegedly by the United States and NATO, but this was used as a geopolitical tool to make sure that the Central Asian countries and the gas- and oil-rich countries avoid working with Russia and Iran and China to get their natural gas outside because they are landlocked countries.

So, the idea was to connect Turkmenistan directly to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, and get the natural gas from there. But this is, in itself, a very useful project, and it also helps to connect Pakistan and India through mutual interest. But it does not exclude building gas pipelines to Russia or to China or through Iran. Iran and Pakistan and India also had their peace pipeline, which the Iranians built all the way to Zahedan, to the border of Pakistan. But pressure from the United States did not allow Pakistan to pursue the project, and also the conflict between Pakistan and India stopped that project. So, there is no conflict between these different oil and gas pipelines; this is just a geopolitical gimmick. This is a zero-sum game, which is quite sick.

We have also among these infrastructure projects the Five Nation Railway, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran Railway. We have also a very important corridor, which goes through from Peshawar in Pakistan to Kabul and to Dushanbe. This goes

through the populated areas from south to north.

But also, we have another corridor which goes from Peshawar to Kabul to Mazar-e-Sharif and into Turkmenistan. We have a number of railways which were built from the neighboring countries; like Iran, which just last year completed the railway from Khaf and Mashhad in Iran to Herat in the northwest of Afghanistan. We have a line from Turkmenistan to Mazar-e-Sharif. Also from Uzbekistan, we have one from Tajikistan to Kunduz. These are completed, but inside Afghanistan, we don't have anything. Actually in 2017, a train arrived from Xinjiang in China into Heiratan, in Afghanistan, carrying construction material. But the missing links are all inside Afghanistan itself. And this is where the concentration and the focus should be for the reconstruction plans for Afghanistan.

Rare Earth Minerals, Copper, and Iron

Now in our 2014 report, *The Silk Road Becomes the World Land-Bridge*, the Russian proposal is outlined, detailing the natural resources that Russian geologists and Afghan geologists had catalogued earlier in the 1970s and '80s. (See **Figure 9**.)

Afghanistan is very rich with very special so-called rare earth minerals, like lithium and tantalum, which is used in medical appliances. Beryllium. All these metals are necessary for modern electronics and high-technology products. Afghanistan also has very large iron and copper mines, which I will come to. Now just pay attention to the coal reserves in Duka, in the north-center of the map. I will come back to it, which is close to a proposed railway.

Now, one good thing the United States engineers and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) did, is that they made a study of the entirety of the Afghan territories to figure out the different deposits of special minerals and non-oil minerals in Afghanistan, and they did a fantastic job. It was completed in 2016 and has been updated several times since then. A report on the USGS projects in Afghanistan, and links to several [reports](#), is available at the USGS website.

Of the two major copper and iron mines in Afghanistan, the Mes Aynak Copper Mine is one of the largest in Asia. People have been producing copper there since the Bronze Age. It's a very huge mine.

A Chinese consortium got into the bidding and succeeded in winning the bid to develop this mine, but there were two major problems for pursuing the work. One was the security problem. The Chinese company

FIGURE 9

Afghanistan: Resources and Future Rail



sites were attacked by militant groups several times. The other problem concerns processing the copper. It is not a simple matter of simply finding it and selling it in the market, as some journalists in the West think. The mined copper is mixed with other rocks and other materials. It has to first be crushed, and then washed with clean water, and then melted.

A Water Management System

This means that you need mechanical work; you need fresh water; you need a lot of power to purify and produce copper. And then you need railways both to bring in coal—the Chinese companies proposed to build a railway to the coal mines I mentioned earlier—to fuel a 500-megawatt power plant, which the Chinese would also build, to do the processing. That meant that the cost of the project, the expenses of the project, went high, but the revenue for the Afghani government and for the Chinese companies was lower, creating a dispute which is not resolved yet. But if we build these development corridors, the power and transport will be available to more easily utilize these.

There is also the Hajigak iron ore mine, which is also in the proximity of Kabul. But to mine the iron ore, you need power, water, transport. You cannot just take the rock from the ground.

So, the final point, which I want to come to—and this is what the development of Afghanistan should imply—is the question of water. Afghanistan was a lush garden many, many centuries ago; but due to periodical long-term climate change, but also all the conflicts that engulfed Afghanistan and the lack of development much of Afghanistan is quite arid. Most of the forest was actually cut down by the population and used, especially in the past 40-50 years of conflict, and therefore you don't see a single tree anywhere around these regions. I mean, Afghanistan was a garden for all Central Asia, and Afghanistan was exporting both nuts and fruits to all the region around it. And now we have a really terrible situation when it comes to water.

Now in Afghanistan, only 67% of the population has access to drinking water, not necessarily tap water. Many have access to drinking water only through wells. The mortality rate in 2004 in Afghanistan for children

below the age of five, was 25%, which is a tragically high level. But half of the mortality is related to water-borne disease—so, providing drinking water is a matter of life or death immediately for many, as well as being critical for economic development. As I said, for mining, you need water; for any industrial process you need water, not simply for drinking.

Afghanistan has a number of large and not very large rivers. We have the Helmand River, the Amu Darya River, the Kabul River, the Logar and Panjshir, and several other small ones. Because their flows all depend on snow melting on the mountains, they have become seasonal and some of them even dry up in the summer and fall of the year.

The water budget of Afghanistan is 55-75 billion cubic meters per year. This is around what the Egyptians get in the Nile River, but the Egyptians get it served on the table directly. But in Afghanistan, to be able to utilize all this water; that is, instead of it running off and evaporating, you need to build a massive water management system.

One interesting thing about the role of the United States was that during World War II, and even before World War II, what President Franklin Roosevelt did with the U.S. economy, especially with infrastructure development programs like the Tennessee Valley Authority, the TVA, which developed a river system from a poor malaria-infested region into an industrial region by building dams, locks, and other water management systems. That model became an attraction for many nations in the world, and Afghanistan was actually one of them. Officials, even during World War II, were visiting the United States to see the TVA; they wanted to copy it in their own country.

In 1946, Afghanistan sought the support of an American consulting company, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers helped build several dams; some of them are now very old. But the thing is that, under Franklin Roosevelt, which had a totally different policy, anti-imperialist policy, and for working and developing sovereign nation states, there were plans put in place to develop all of Afghanistan's water management system. This is what is required now, and it's possible to do it.

China is a good example of building massive water management systems, both for providing water, for the population, for agriculture, for the different industrial activities, sustaining that process, and re-greening Af-

ghanistan, and make it the forest and the garden it was before.

Now, one important point is the opium production. A country which can produce 90% of the opium in the whole world, can actually produce food. Most of that production of opium took place in the British-controlled area in Helmand province along the Helmand River. So that area, as Mr. Arlacchi has outlined in this conference, can very easily be shifted from opium production into food production.

Afghanistan, the Beautiful Garden

I would like to end by calling to mind the Gardens of the Babur Palace in Kabul. Babur was the first of the Mogul governors. He ordered the building of a palace and a beautiful garden in Kabul which still exists today.

As Helga Zepp-LaRouche said in her statement and previous statements, this situation in Afghanistan offers mankind a small window of opportunity to create a better world. Now we can turn this small window into a major gate through which the caravans of the Silk Road can pass through. The Afghan people and their children deserve a better future. Everyone else is called upon to support the reconciliation process through dialogue by providing the different Afghani factions with economic incentives, not orders.

As Chinese President Xi Jinping put it in his recent discussion with the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani:

This process of reconciliation should be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. *They* have to determine their own path to reconciliation. And rather than treating the diverse ethnic groups in Afghanistan, the Baluch, the Pashtun, the Tajik, the Uzbeks, the Hazaras, the Persians, as proxies of the neighboring countries in a war of all against all, let the diversity of the Afghani population be like the diverse roses and trees in one garden; cared for and gardened by the Afghani people themselves.

It is time now to get rid of satanic British geopolitics and replace it with the geo-economics and humanist win-win physical economics that the late American economist Lyndon LaRouche advocated for decades. I thank you for your attention.