

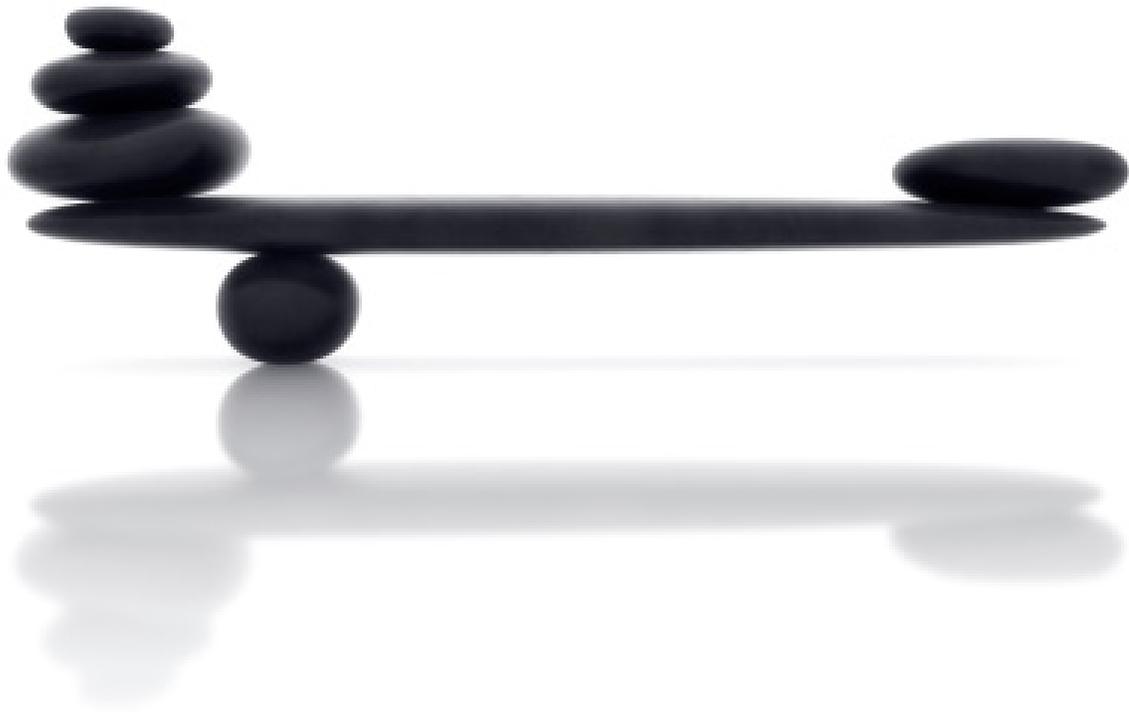
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THE SILK ROAD INITIATIVE

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NEW SILK ROAD INITIATIVE

Afghanistan is a country that has gone through over 30 years of war and internal strife. This has created a country with infrastructure that is fifty years behind where it should be. In order to catch up, Afghanistan needs to move quickly on many fronts. A cornerstone of this effort is regional cooperation. President Karzai strongly supports this for Afghanistan's future. Historically, Afghanistan has stood as a strategic crossroads, as an important place within the region. While the past 30 plus years of conflict has devastated Afghanistan, the nation has come a long way in the past 10 years, since the beginning of a new Afghanistan. It began with meetings in Bonn, an interim government, and has come quite far in the past 10 years. The results from many infrastructure projects have not been seen yet, but will be visible in five to 10 years time. Once the infrastructure begins improving, Afghanistan has the potential to be the next important emerging market. This is more likely to occur by taking a regional approach, rather than focusing solely on Afghanistan. There have been a number of good initiatives come out of conferences in Kabul, London and a regional conference in Istanbul.

One initiative I launched was the Silk Road Initiative. It is focused on the development of Afghanistan, the country's road in the Silk Road and the nations surrounding Afghanistan. Many of the infrastructure projects today can be implemented at the national level, but the impact as well as linkages can be greatly increased at the regional level. Some projects benefit not just one country, but the region as a whole. TAPI, TAZA, and the Amu River are all examples of projects that involve and benefit several countries in the region. Creating regional projects also gives regional actors an incentive to be involved in peace and conflict resolution in places such as Afghanistan. It will also contribute to peace creation within the as each neighbor, actor will be involved in order to protect their investments. In these initiatives Afghanistan welcomes involvement from Turkey. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said "This is where we want to go; the U.S. will fully support and endorse the Silk Road Initiative." A recent regional conference held in New York, and hosted by the German foreign minister, provided a launching pad for the Silk Road Initiative. It also provided opportunities for many countries to reflect and give reaction and opinions, which were overwhelmingly positive. Most participants endorsed and supported this initiative. The success will depend on the involvement of all regional actors, the donor community and the capacity of Afghanistan to ensure this initiative goes forward.

This initiative is primarily intended to help Afghanistan, as the infrastructure has been in total disaster. In the Silk Road Initiative, there are approximately 18 programs and projects focused on rebuilding railroads, networks, electricity transfers, and oil and gas projects. While most of these are Afghan-centered, others involve Uzbekistan,

Turkmenistan, Pakistan and Iran. The program would begin with an initial investment of five billion dollars and would grow to approximately 18 billion dollars if all projects are funded and completed. The initiative still needs a regional setup in which everyone participates according to contributions, interests and needs. These national and regional details will be more firmly defined during future conferences and engagements with donor partners and neighbors in the region. There will be room for further development, both on the academic and political level.

The Silk Road Initiative fits very well in the historical context of Afghanistan. Afghanistan is also very pleased to have India endorsing the initiative, along with the Tajiks and many others. As a result of the infrastructure these projects can bring to Afghanistan and the surrounding region, Afghanistan can offer quite a bit as a crossroad of trade, expansion, connectivity and transit areas. Afghanistan is fortunate to be endowed with an abundance of natural resources. Over the next 10 years, Afghanistan will be able to develop an estimated 1.5 to 3.5 trillion dollars worth of natural resources. India, Pakistan and China all need these resources and regional cooperation on infrastructure projects will allow these and other nations access to these vital resources.

Afghanistan can serve the region as a neutral ground, a place where regional actors can meet, discuss trade issues, customs and other regional matters. In order to establish Afghanistan as this regional meeting site, the railroads need to further developed, included connections between the major cities of Kabul, Kandahar and Herat. This will eventually join a regional railroad network, connecting Central and South Asia. Afghanistan has also joined a number of regional bodies, including ACO, SAARC and Trifecta. The nation plays important roles in many of the agreements put forth to solve a lot of problems in the region, and this is a continued area of focus for the government. The whole Silk Road Initiative is up to Afghanistan first, and secondly, the neighboring regional countries involved in determining the final size and scope of the initiative. This is a whole new area of regional cooperation. National government now must address issues that benefit the entire region, not just one country. This is the vision and hopefully it can be continued further.

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