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## Lapis Lazuli Route and its Importance for Afghanistan

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### ABSTRACT

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor, also known as the Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan-Georgia, Turkey Transport Corridor, is an ancient trade route that connects Afghanistan with neighboring countries and beyond to Europe. The route takes its name from the precious blue stone, Lapis Lazuli, that was once traded along its path. However, due to political tensions in the region and the world, the corridor was closed for a significant period, causing economic challenges for Afghanistan. With the struggles of the previous government, efforts were made to break the economic barricade, and the corridor was opened for practical usage. This move has created numerous economic and political opportunities for Afghanistan, especially in terms of trade with Eastern and Western Europe. The Lapis Lazuli International transit route has become a vital link for the country, and the current government must make full use of it to ensure the national interests of Afghanistan are protected. This research is significant in the fields of culture, economics, and politics, as it aims to identify all the available opportunities that the Afghan government can practically benefit from by utilizing the Lapis Lazuli International transit route. The study reviewed various sources to gather information about the cultural, economic, and political importance of the corridor. The expected outcome of this research is to provide sufficient information about the route's importance and how it can be used to protect Afghanistan's interests economically and politically. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor has the potential to promote economic growth, regional integration, and peace-building in Afghanistan and its neighboring countries. This research serves as a useful resource for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners interested in the region's economic and political dynamics and provides insights into how to maximize the benefits of the Lapis Lazuli International transit route for Afghanistan and the wider region.

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**KEYWORDS:** Lapis Lazuli, Corridor, Transit, Afghanistan

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Lapis lazuli, also known simply as lapis, is a metamorphic rock prized for its deep blue color and has been valued as a semi-precious stone since ancient times (Wikipedia, n.d.). The mining of lapis lazuli dates back as early as the 7th millennium BC, with ancient mines located in Sar-i Sang, Shortugai, and other sites in the Badakhshan Province of northeastern Afghanistan (Pala International, n.d.; The Past, n.d.). These deposits lie at elevations ranging from approximately 1,830 to 5,180 meters above sea level (Pala International, n.d.). Archaeological evidence shows that lapis beads have been discovered in Neolithic burials in Mehrgarh and the Caucasus, as well as near the mines of northeast Afghanistan, which continue to serve as a major source of the stone (The Past, n.d.; Lo Giudice et al., 2016). Substantial quantities are also mined west of Lake Baikal in Russia and in the Andes Mountains of Peru, where the Inca civilization used lapis lazuli to craft jewelry and carved artifacts. Smaller deposits occur in Pakistan, Italy, Mongolia, the United States, Canada, and Mauritania (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Archaeological findings indicate that lapis extraction in Badakhshan began around 6,500 years ago and that, by about 4,400 years ago, lapis from Afghanistan was already being used in the construction and ornamentation of the Egyptian pyramids, demonstrating ancient trade connections between Afghanistan and Egypt (Hamshahri, 2025; The Past, n.d.). Despite the roughly 3,220-kilometer distance between these regions, this exchange flourished because lapis lazuli was considered one of the most precious and symbolic gemstones in ancient Egyptian culture (Hamshahri, 2025). Lapis lazuli played a significant role in the funerary mask of Tutankhamun (1323–1341 BC), where it was inlaid alongside gold and colored glass (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976). Toward the end of the Middle Ages, lapis lazuli began to be exported to Europe, where it was ground into powder to create ultramarine—the most prized and expensive of all blue pigments (GIA, 2022; Wikipedia, 2024). Ultramarine was favored by renowned artists of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, including Masaccio, Perugino, Titian, and Vermeer. It was often used for the clothing of central figures in paintings, especially the Virgin Mary (GIA, 2022).

Traces of ultramarine pigment have even been found in the dental calculus of medieval nuns and scribes, suggesting their participation in manuscript illumination and book production (Radini et al., 2019). In addition to Afghanistan, where the ancient Sar-e-Sang mines remain a major source of lapis lazuli, the stone is also found in regions west of Lake Baikal in Russia and in the Andes Mountains of South America. Smaller deposits occur in Pakistan, Italy, Mongolia, the United States, and Canada (Wikipedia, 2024). According to historical records, Afghanistan has been using lapis lazuli for 6,500 years. Traders exported lapis lazuli from the Badakhshan region to other countries through various routes. Approximately 2,500 years ago, a direct and secure route was established connecting Asian, African, and European countries.

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This route starts from Herat, a province in Afghanistan, and passes through Turkmenbasy in Turkmenistan along the Caspian Sea. From there, it continues to Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, then to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. Finally, the corridor links the cities of Kars and Istanbul in Turkey, providing access to Europe, and from there connects to different countries across continents via independent waterways. Due to geopolitical changes and the situation in Afghanistan, the route became unusable for a period. However, it was reopened on July 15, 2017, during the seventh meeting of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference for Afghanistan (RECCA) and was signed by Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017).

### **1.2 Significance of the study**

As we know that the existence of a good economic system plays a major role in the development of a country; accordingly, transit and trade corridors have a very important role in the economic development of a country, so this research is conducted about the significance of the Lapis route, so this suggests the importance of cultural, economic and political sides of this research.

### **1.3 Objectives of the study**

The following are the fundamental objectives of this study;

1. To identify the route of Lapis
2. By taking into consideration the Lapis route, identifying the new and efficient opportunities
3. Getting effective benefits from the opportunities that are provided by the Lapis route.

### **1.4 Problem statement of the study**

We have witnessed that in our country, everywhere it is discussed the economic surroundings of Afghanistan are discussed, but if asked, everyone asks how we utilize Afghanistan is utilized from the trade corridors. They do not have sufficient answers for it as it needs, so this study provides new and significant information.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The cultural, economic, and political significance of the Lapis route**

The Lapis route has cultural, economic, and political importance; to know every part well, it should be studied as apart.

#### **2.1.1 The cultural importance of the Lapis route**

The countries involved in the route, from its beginning to its end, fortunately share similar cultures as they are all Islamic nations. This is because the historical Lapis Lazuli route, which started around 2,500 years ago, was shaped by the common trading activities and customs of the people living along the route. With

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the reopening of this route during the national unity government of Afghanistan, it is expected that cultural interactions and relations among all five countries (Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey) will be strengthened, fostering strong and friendly relationships (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017; Government of Turkmenistan, 2018).

### **2.1.2 The economic importance of the Lapis route**

Merely relying on foreign aid is insufficient for the economic development of a country due to the potential challenges and crises that arise when aid is discontinued. To foster economic growth, it is crucial to invest in infrastructure, support domestic businesses, establish efficient and profitable methods for mineral extraction, encourage domestic production, and access international markets. A focus on low consumption and effective sales strategies is also important. Fortunately, the Lapis route offers significant advantages for imports and exports, being shorter and more cost-effective compared to alternative routes (Regional Economic Cooperation Conference for Afghanistan [RECCA], n.d.; Council of Azerbaijan Transit and Trade, n.d.).

### **2.1.3 The political significance of the Lapis route:**

Due to its geopolitical location, Afghanistan has historically been a focal point for political rivalries. This has resulted in Afghanistan's involvement in regional and international economic and political arenas, which has impeded its political and economic development. Opening the historical route of Lapis Lazuli has been a significant endeavour undertaken by the Afghan government in response to this pressing issue. By doing so, neighbouring countries have been relieved of political pressures, and at the same time, they can forge closer political ties with four countries (Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey) (Regional Economic Cooperation Conference for Afghanistan [RECCA], n.d.; Samoon & Ahmadi, 2024).

## **2.2 Available opportunities of the Lapis lazuli route**

Without a doubt, the trade roads create opportunities for countries in various fields, and the Lapis route has also created opportunities for our country in various fields, which are studied below for a better understanding:

### **2.2.1 In terms of trade:**

Most countries use business to receive advantages and meet their needs, so people can use them in time. It has invested in various fields, and most of its economy is based on the income from trade. The Lapis route is considered to be the best way for material relations with other countries of the world. Let's take advantage of this great opportunity (Tariq, 2023).

### **2.2.2 In terms of social life**

The countries situated at the beginning and end of the route share similar social characteristics with the people of Europe and developed nations in the region. Our nation and government can benefit from the knowledge and expertise of their consular representatives. By drawing upon their valuable experiences, such as methods to improve per capita income, family structures, social dynamics, scientific advancements, social cohesion, and patriotism, we can utilize these insights to foster the development of social life in Afghanistan (Aryobee, 2023; European External Action Service [EEAS], 2021).

### **2.2.3 In terms of tourism**

By considering the history and culture of the countries involved in the Lapis route, it becomes evident that these nations possess rich historical backgrounds and share cultural similarities. Consequently, the representatives from these five countries can collaborate innovatively to develop a comprehensive tourism package for visitors from other countries, particularly European tourists. This package could include the convenience of a single ticket, facilitating travel across these nations. As a result, it can be confidently stated that a significant portion of tourists from other countries would be attracted to explore the diverse cultural, religious, and historical attractions present in these five countries. These destinations offer numerous historical sites, cultural landmarks, and religious artifacts, making them appealing for sightseeing and exploration in the realms of history, culture, and religion (Turkmenistan-government, 2018).

### **2.2.4 In terms of education**

Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey have extensive expertise in the field of education, while Afghanistan lags in this area. It is important to leverage this knowledge for the country's benefit. By utilizing their expertise, we can educate professionals in business, economy, and technology, enabling us to compete with other countries in the region and globally in the future (Turkmenistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

### **2.2.5 In terms of establishing military relations**

Turkey has been a supportive and collaborative partner in training our country's military throughout various historical periods. Similarly, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia were once part of the Soviet Union and possess significant experience in military matters. This has facilitated the establishment of positive relations with these countries, leading to the signing of cooperation agreements focused on the training of our soldiers and ensuring regional security (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

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**2.2.6 In terms of religion**

Most countries at the pointing out our country's religious extremism; therefore, we can use the experiences and methods of Azerbaijan and Turkey, and we can accommodate the Islamic principles better. On the one hand, we can respond positively to their critics (religious extremism) because these three countries (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey) share the same religion (Aryobee, 2023).

**2.3 Challenges towards the Lapis Lazuli route**

In addition to hand opportunities, this route has some challenges and obstacles, which are discussed below for better understanding.

**2.3.1 In terms of representatives in the mentioned countries:**

When examining the operations of our Ministry of Foreign Affairs over time, it becomes apparent that the necessary adjustments have not been made. The individuals appointed to represent our country at the highest level often rely on personal relationships rather than possessing strong knowledge and creative abilities. Consequently, they are unable to effectively safeguard the interests of our nation. It is believed that the lack of knowledge and limited capacity of our representatives in Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey pose significant obstacles that can negatively impact various trade-related matters (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017; Progress. Online, 2025).

**2.3.2 In terms of the security of the route**

Another issue concerning this route pertains to security concerns, primarily due to Afghanistan's presence along the route. Afghanistan's unstable security situation poses a potential threat to the safety of this route, as the lack of adequate security measures increases the risk of major accidents and incidents along the railways (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017; Progress. Online, 2025).

**2.3.3 In terms of the existence of several Railways**

A significant challenge facing the Lapis route is the lack of security measures in place, which hampers the smooth operation of trade. The presence of railways with different gauges further exacerbates this issue, resulting in reduced trading speed (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017; Progress. Online, 2025).

**2.3.4 In terms of the processing and packaging of commercial items**

Another obstacle that Afghanistan has been facing for years is in the processing and packaging of commercial goods because we are high in the quality of goods but low in processing, packaging, and shapes, which prevents the sales of our goods in the international markets, so, the Lapis route, which is an important route for transporting goods to European countries, therefore demands high quality, modern packaging, and processing (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017).

### **2.3.5 In terms of the multiple customs**

Another problem facing the Lapis route is the existence of multiple customs that increase the price of goods and prolong transfer times, which are major obstacles to profitable trade (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017; Progress. Online, 2025).

### **2.3.6 In terms of political competitions**

Another major problem and challenge to this route is the existence of political rivalries in the region, such as Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, and India. In addition, the competition of Russia with Europe, China with India, and Iran with the United States creates obstacles both directly and indirectly against this route (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017; Progress. Online, 2025).

## **2.4 Solutions to the Challenges of the Lapis Lazuli Route**

To make optimal use of the Lapis Lazuli Route, there are logically-based solutions that can be proposed as follows:

### **2.4.1 Representatives in the relevant countries**

If we aim to utilize the Lapis Lazuli Route effectively and sustainably, we must pay full attention to our representatives in the countries along the route. This means that our ambassadors, consuls, and commercial attachés should be individuals who, while fostering strong cooperation with the host countries, also ensure full and effective use of all facilities along the route (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017; Ahmad et al., 2023).

### **2.4.2 Coordination among incoming railways**

The lack of coordination among railways entering our country has made problem-solving difficult, but effective management is not impossible. Constructing dry ports with multiple gauges and regulating trains based on cargo transfer can mitigate this challenge (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017; Tariq, 2023).

### **2.4.3 Producing goods according to regional and international standards**

To maximize the benefits of the route for our products, we must align production with regional and global standards, particularly those of European countries (Ahmad et al., 2023).

### **2.4.4 Establishing a tariff system at customs along the route**

If the Lapis Lazuli Route agreement has not specified a tariff, one should be established, or an existing tariff should be reduced to encourage more trade along the route (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017).



#### **2.4.5 Transforming political competition into political balance**

To control and manage regional and international political competition, Afghanistan must maintain a balance in its foreign policy among Russia, China, India, Iran, Turkey, Europe, and the United States by appointing professional and specialized individuals in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Tariq, 2023).

#### **2.4.6 Ensuring security and facilitating traders**

The Afghan government must ensure security in the sections of the Lapis Lazuli Route located in Afghanistan and provide complete facilities to traders, while countries along the route should provide incentives to encourage continuous use (Transit Corridors – Azerbaijan, n.d.; Ahmad et al., 2023).

### **3. Methodology**

The type of research would be analytical and descriptive; the type of data used for the study is secondary, as different books and research articles are consulted. Organizational homepages were also consulted, and it has been ensured that only authentic sources are being used in this academic article. Also, after the accurate research of the Lapis route, which includes opportunities, challenges, and solutions according to the mentioned route, influenced by the researchers' own ideas.

### **4. Findings**

Based on this scientific and research-based study, the following points can be highlighted as key findings:

1. **Historical and Strategic Importance:** The Lapis Lazuli Route is an ancient corridor with significant political, economic, and cultural importance for Afghanistan and the countries along its path.
2. **Challenges and Solutions:** Several challenges hinder the route's effectiveness, including issues related to representation in neighbouring countries, route security, the presence of different railway gauges, processing and packaging of trade goods, multiple customs points, political competition, and providing facilities for foreign traders. However, viable solutions exist, such as effective representation in these countries, coordination among incoming railways, production of goods according to regional and international standards, establishment of a unified customs tariff along the route, transforming political competition into balanced cooperation, and ensuring security and full facilities for all traders. These measures are essential to enable the practical and sustainable use of the route.
3. **Global Connectivity:** The route connects Afghanistan with the entire world, offering the shortest, most cost-effective, and easiest pathway for trade and transit.



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4. **Economic Benefits:** Practical utilization of the route would significantly reduce economic isolation for Afghanistan and benefit neighbouring countries by integrating them into regional and global trade networks.

## 5. Discussion

Since the Afghan government is recognized as the planner and coordinator of the Lapis Lazuli Route, the corridor provides opportunities to connect Central Asian countries with Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, present-day Georgia, and Turkish territory, and ultimately reach countries across all continents via open waters. If utilized practically and sustainably, the route would be highly cost-effective and secure. In addition, some neighboring countries could overcome economic isolation.

However, the central issue is that, while Afghanistan is highly interested in the practical implementation of this route, the countries along its path—Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey—do not share the same level of commitment. This lack of full engagement hinders the effective and sustainable use of the route. A logical and fundamental solution to this challenge is for the Afghan government to organize joint meetings, as well as scientific, political, historical, and cultural conferences, based on research conducted by experts and stakeholders along the corridor. Such initiatives can increase their interest and prepare them for practical cooperation.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be stated that the Lapis Lazuli Route is an ancient corridor. The Afghan government has played a significant role as the planner and coordinator of this route, ensuring that it remains cost-effective and secure. Moreover, the obstacles that neighboring countries might create on other transit routes to achieve their own objectives will largely be reduced. Instead of attempting to disrupt the routes, these countries will be encouraged to connect with Afghanistan, ultimately contributing to the country's economic prosperity.

## 6. Recommendations

The challenges and obstacles that have raised questions about the effectiveness and efficiency of the Lapis lazuli route are discussed and provide the logical solutions as below:

### 1: In terms of representatives in the mentioned countries

If we want to use the Lapis lazuli route effectively and sustainably, then we should pay full attention to our representatives in the countries along the Lapis route, which means that the ambassadors, consuls, and trade representatives should be such persons, who can establish a strong friendship with these countries, in

addition, they should make full and perfect use of the facilities on which are exist along the route, and also get rid of all the obstacles that cause problems.

### **2: Establishing unity between the railways coming to the country**

In this regard, I must say that solving the problem and lack of unity in the railways coming to our country is a difficult task, but it is not impossible to organize it effectively, because we can build several dry ports for the railways with several gauges, so let's do it, and adjust the trains, which have different tracks, based on the change of load, which will reduce the speed of business, but this is the only way.

### **3: Creating products with regional and international standards**

If we want to use the perfect and profitable use of the way for our products, in this case, we should make our products meet international standards, especially the standards of European countries, and we should increase production, especially in those countries along this route that need more, as well as in European countries, such as saffron and precious stones.

### **4: Establishing a tariff in the existing customs along the route**

In the absence of an agreed tariff for the route, it becomes necessary to establish a custom tariff. However, if such a tariff has not been established, there should be efforts to create a cost-effective custom tariff that promotes sustainable and expanded trade.

### **5: Turning political competition into political balance**

In order to control and regulate the regional and international political rivalries, Afghanistan must establish a balance in its foreign policy towards Russia, China, India, Iran, Turkey, Europe, and America. It is possible when we employ professionals, experts, and experienced persons in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### **6: Ensuring the security of the route and creating adequate facilities for all traders**

Another significant matter to consider is the responsibility of the Afghan government to ensure the security of the Lapis route within its territory. Furthermore, it is crucial to provide sufficient facilities and support to all traders engaged in trade along this route. Additionally, the countries at the starting, intermediate, and ending points of the route should collaborate to establish a comprehensive package of amenities and advantages for traders, based on a mutually beneficial trade agreement. This approach aims to foster a sustainable and thriving route by incentivizing and encouraging traders to utilize it.

### **Conflict of Interest:**

All authors declare no conflict of interest in any part of the research.

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