Political Economy of Trade Corridors of Land-Locked Developing Countries: Case Studies of Afghanistan and Bhutan

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Abstract

Many developing countries have been able to take the advantage of global economy through integration into global value chains (GVCs) as an export-oriented model of development strategy. However, many land-locked developing countries (LLDCs) have been unable to do so. The aim of this paper is to find out the fundamental reason behind this inability. After comparing the two case studies of Afghanistan and Bhutan with the former as a relatively failed case and the latter a relatively successful one, the paper concludes that the underlying cause of divergence between LLDCs in their ability to integrate into GVCs is the political economy of trade corridors. Due to political economic reasons, transit countries prevent LLDCs' to efficiently integrate into GVSs. Thus, it becomes inefficient for both domestic businesses and multinational corporations to invest in integration of such LLDCs into GVCs.

Keywords: Political Economy of Trade Corridors, Global Value Chains, Land Locked Developing Countries, Transit Countries, Global Economy

Introduction

Integration into Global Value Chains (GVC) has been a development plan for "economic upgrading" in many developing countries(Gereffi, 2019; Stolzenburg et al., 2019). Thanks to globalization, many developing countries could take the advantage of global production processes and find a place for themselves into one or more GVCs(Sivarak, 2017). Despite critical approaches to this trend (Milberg & Winkler, 2014, p. 89), there are ample evidence proving the fact thatwith appropriate policies (Cusolito et al., 2016) "outsourcing economics" helped many developing countries to participate into GVCs and global economy (OECD, 2013, pp. 135-178) as an export-oriented growth model of development. However, this has not been the case with all developing countries. There are many factors leading to divergence between developing countries in terms of their ability to integrate into GVCs, but when it comes to land-locked developing countries (LLDCs),access to global markets by trade corridors through bilateral and regional agreements aremore prominent than the others. Among different LLDCs, there are a small number of cases which could find reliable and efficient trade corridors and participate in GVCs, but this has not been the case with all. The current paper is endeavoring to answer the question of whywe see variations between different LLDCs in terms of their ability to have reliable, efficient trade corridors helping them to integrate into GVCs.

There are some scholars observing the problem in a micro-level analysis arguing that policy factors such as trade facilitation policies, logistics infrastructure, information integration, and national laws and policies are the leading factors of weakness of LLDCs to successfully participate into GVCs (Yang & Chang, 2019; ESCAP, 2006; UN-OHRLLS, 2018). In a more policy-oriented analysis focusing on state intervention in the businesses, even some argue that "transport-cost reducing R&D subsidy" for export promotion in LLDCs can resolve the problem (Normizan & Yasunori, 2014). Some have proposed law-based solutions to resolve this challenge (Casal&Selamé, 2015). Most literature concentrate on policy-oriented solutions to address the challenge instead of going deeper to seethe underlying causes. In other words, what all these explanations ignore is the political economy of trade corridors connecting LLDCs to global markets through transit neighbors as the underlying cause.There is much research on the political economic analysis of trade corridors of LLDCs. Gallup, Sachs, and Mellinger (1999) argue that some transit countries have some political, economic, and military interests and intentions to raise the costs of transportation to their neighboring LLDC. In a theoretical and empirical study, Arvis and his colleagues(2010) show that the main factor of high costs of transportation is not physical constraints, rather it is rent-seeking activities imposed upon LLDCs' traders in the transit country. In a study on LLDCs of Africa, Teravaninthorn & Raballand (2009, p. 5) also found similar results.

In this line of reasoning, this paper argues thatthe main reason behind the ability/inability of LLDCsto have a reliable, efficient trade corridor to integrate into GVCs is thus a political economic one. Therefore, theexistence of a reliable, efficient transit corridor guaranteedby an institutionalized, agreed-upon bilateral agreement with the origin country is the main factor causing the ability/inability of LLDCs to use corridors passing through their transit countries to participate in GVCs.

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Addressing this issue is of great significance as there are currently 31 LLDCs in the world, constituting 400 million population and 7% of developing countries' population (World Population Review, 2021). These countries do not have access to sea and international waters, and it is exceedingly difficult and costly for them to integrate into existing GVCs. As a result, most LLDCs are suffering from poverty and underdevelopment. Therefore, addressing this question is not only contributive to literature of political economy of trade corridors, but also to policy too.

Methodologically, I will conduct this research using comparative case analyses ofAfghanistan and Bhutan in the time period of 2001-2020. I utilize theoretical frameworks of political economy of trade corridors, with historical accounts as well as policy-oriented sources supported by some descriptive statistics. Reliable transit corridor in an institutionalized, bilateral agreement with the origin country is the independent variable, and the ability to integrate into GVC is the dependent variable of the paper. I have selected the two case studies of Afghanistan and Bhutan, as they provide variation with the latter as a relatively successful case and the former as a relatively failed one. Both Afghanistan and Bhutan are LLDCs in the same region ofSouth Asia. These two economies are less diversified with a large proportion of their exports reliant upon agricultural commodities and natural mineral resources. And most importantly, they are both mountainous countries with the same challenges for construction of trade transit infrastructures such as roads and railroads.

I have organized the paper in four parts. First, I have provided a brief literature review on how important and vital is for LLDCs to integrate into global economy through one or more GVCs. Then, I have discussed the political economy of trade corridors and bilateral agreements between transit country and LLDCfor the latter to have access to seas and be able to integrate into the global production networks. In the secondpart, I have provided a brief comparison of my two case studies to determine that to what extent they are connected to the global economy. Third, I provided a detailed account of political economy of trade corridors of Afghanistan and Bhutan separately to apply my independent variable to each case studyto test variation in my dependent variable which is ability/inability of LLDCs to have reliable and efficient trade corridors to participate in GVCs. And fourth, I have provided a brief explanation of my findings in results and discussion part.

Land-Locked Developing Countries

LLDCs are those developing countries which have no shoreline on open seas. Even though there are some land-locked countries in Europe, they have full access to international waters and thus are well connected to the global economythanks to the European Union regulations and single European market. But when it comes to LLDCs, they face two challenges of development and integration into GVCs, simultaneously (Arvis et al., 2011, p. 1). As table 1 shows, there are currently 31 LLDCs in the world, most of which are considered as least developed countries (LDCs) of the globe. Lack of access to reliable and permanent international trade corridors is the most important reason behind their weakness to successfully integrate into GVCs and take a large portion of their population out of poverty(Faye et al., 2004).

Table 1. Land-Locked Developing Countries by Region

Sub-Saharan Africa	Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Niger, Rwanda, Swaziland, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Europe and Central Asia	Armenia; Azerbaijan; Belarus;* Kazakhstan; Kosovo;* Kyrgyz Republic; Macedonia, FYR; Republic of Moldova; Serbia;* Tajikistan; Turkmenistan; Uzbekistan
South Asia	Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal
East Asia	Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mongolia
South America	Plurinational State of Bolivia, Paraguay

From "Arvis et al., 2011, p. 2"

Most LLDCs export unprocessed food and other low value-added commodities such as wood and timber, and to a degree unprocessed mineral. Due to their lack of access to international markets, many LLDCs are even deprived of preferential market access opportunities given by developed countries of North America and Europetoless developed countries (LDCs) (for preferential market access literature see McQueen, 2002; Brenton & Ikezuki, 2004; De Melo & Portugal-Perez, 2013).

With globalization and coming of "Washington Consensus" in 1980s, the paradigm of development changed, and international trade became the core driver of economic development (Acharyya & Kar, 2014). Therefore, there should have been taken some fundamental measures to connect all developing countries, especially LLDCs to the global economy as a development plan and policy. However, not major efforts were made in this regard. That is why today, most of LLDCs are among the poor countries of the globe.

Trade costs for LLDCs are so high that neither multinational corporations (MNCs) nor domestic firms are willing to make long-run investments for transforming the countries' economy to be a proper environment for higher value-added exporting activities. Therefore, being a LLDC means higher costs for integration into GVCs and thus lower chances of development. To address this challenge, initiatives such as Almoty Program of Action (UN-OHRLLS, 2004) and Vienna Program of Action (UN-OHRLLS, 2014) have endeavored to help LLDCs to upgrade.

In doing so, the World Bank and other regional development banks have helped most LLDCs to build required infrastructure for facilitation of trade and transportation in different initiatives to build roads and railroads and other transportation infrastructure. Northern Corridor in EastAfrica or the Douala corridor in Central Africa are two examples of such initiatives.(Arvis et al., 2011, p. 6).

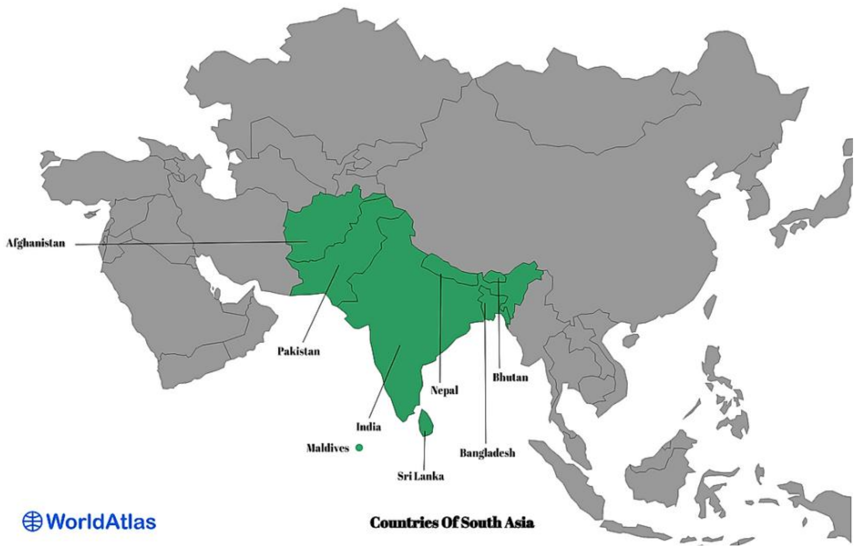
These trade facilitation initiatives helped relatively some LLDCs to connect to GVCs, but were not sufficient enough. The LLDCs are dependent upon one or more transit neighbors to facilitate the transportation of products and their connection to global markets. To be better connected to GVCs, LLDCs need to have reliable, efficient trade corridors secured by agreements with their transit neighbors. As historical experiences show, LLDCs have many difficulties in transit corridors with their transit neighbors, especially when their relations are troubled, and the transit country has a rent-based economy.

For a reliable and efficient trade corridor,there must be an institutionalized agreement between LLDCs and transit neighbors to reduce the unreliability and uncertainty regarding trade corridors both for MNCs and domestic corporations to confidently invest in value-added economic activities to integrate them into GVCs, with minimum associated risk. GVCs in today's globalized economy are so reliant upon their different production processesinclusinf their backward and forward linkages that it is consideredvery risky for MNCs, as stakeholders of GVCs, to invest in troubled regions of the globe where LLDC and its transit neighbor have ill relations. LLDCs are facing with a difficult situation in which it is so risky for the potential investors to rely on un-institutionalized agreements of these countries with their transit neighbors. Therefore, agreements on institutionalized frameworks, being considered as legal commitments, between LLDCs and their transit neighbors is of great significance in facilitation of trade and integration of these countries into GVCs.

Cases Studies: Afghanistan and Bhutan

Two case studies of the paper are Afghanistan and Bhutan. As figure 1 exhibits, these are both LLDCs in South Asia. This factor controls for other alternative explanations focusing on geographical dimensions of different regions of the globe.

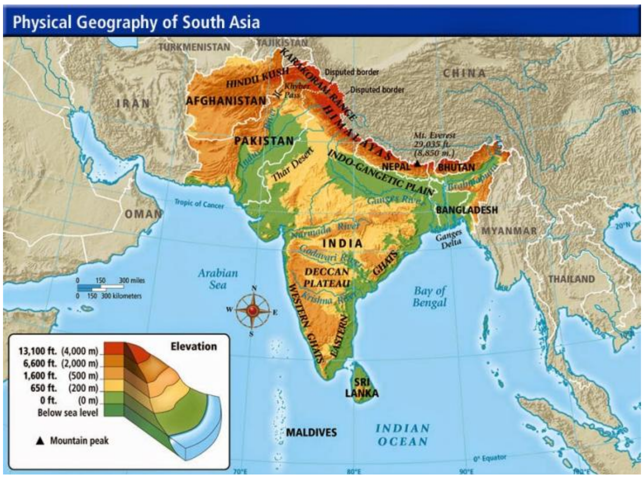
Figure 1. The Countries of South Asia



From "(Sawe, 2016)"

As figure 2 exhibits, both Afghanistan and Bhutan have a similar physical characteristic, as they are both mountainous countries. This stands against many explanations claiming that physical constraints of a country increase the costs of trade with that country, thus they will not be integrated into GVCs.

Figure 2. Physical Geography of South Asia



From "Printable Maps, September 03, 2008"

As table 2 shows, both Afghanistan and Bhutan are among those limited LLDCs which are only reliant on road trade corridors. This factor also controls for infrastructure explanations maintaining that the reason behind ability/inability of LLDCs to integrate into GVCs and engage in regional trade corridors is the kind of transportation infrastructure they possess.

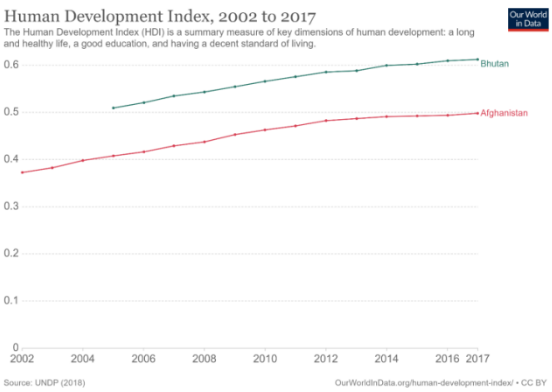
Table 2. LLDCs with Rail and Water Transport Connections

Region	*Rail*	*River, Sea, or Lake*	*Both rail and water*	*Neither rail nor water*
Sub-Saharan Africa	Botswana Burkina Faso Ethiopia Lesotho Malawi Mali Swaziland Zambia Zimbabwe	Central African Republic	Burundi Uganda	Chad Rwanda Niger
South America			Plurinational State of Bolivia Paraguay	
Central Asia	Kyrgyz Rep. Tajikistan Uzbekistan		Azerbaijan Kazakhstan Turkmenistan	
East Asia	Mongolia		Lao PDR	
South Asia	Nepal			Afghanistan Bhutan
Eastern Europe	Armenia			
Totals	**15**	**1**	**8**	**5**

From "Arvis et al., 2011, p. 124"

However, there are many differences between these two LLDCs. To measure the overall current situations of Afghanistan and Bhutan, the current paper has used Human Development Index (HDI) to compare these two LLDCs. According to figure 3, Bhutan has scored on average 0.1 better than Afghanistan during the 2002-2017 period.

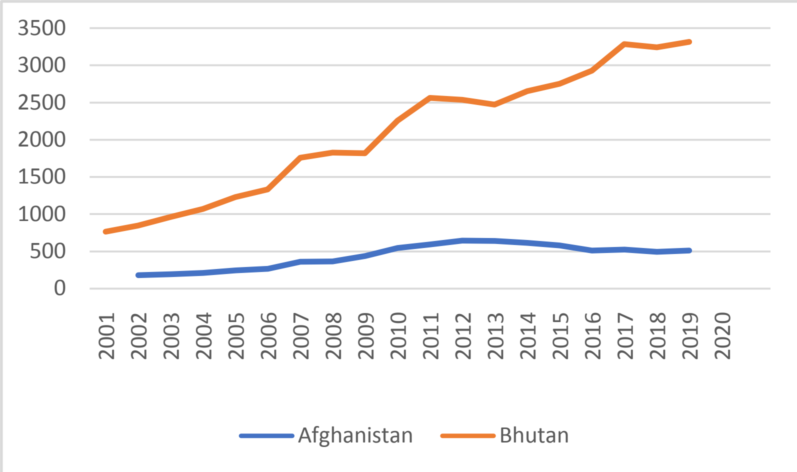
Figure 3. Human Development Index (2002-2017)



From "Our World in Data – Human Development Index: Afghanistan vs Bhutan"

As figure 4 suggests,both Afghanistan and Bhutan had close real GDP per capita in 2001, but since then, they have experienced divergent paths with Afghanistan stagnating and Bhutan growing regularly.

Figure 4. Real GDP per capita, Constant 2010 $US, of Afghanistan and Bhutan (2001-2020)



From "World Bank Open Data – GDP per capita: Afghanistan vs Bhutan"

To better understand the effect of trade on GDP per capita growth in these two countries, it is necessary to examine how much share of these two LLDCs' GDP is attributed to their value of exported goods. As figure 5 shows, the value of exported goods as share of GDP between Afghanistan and Bhutan are different, with Afghanistan stagnating between 2-6% and Bhutan allocating its one third share of GDP to exported goods.

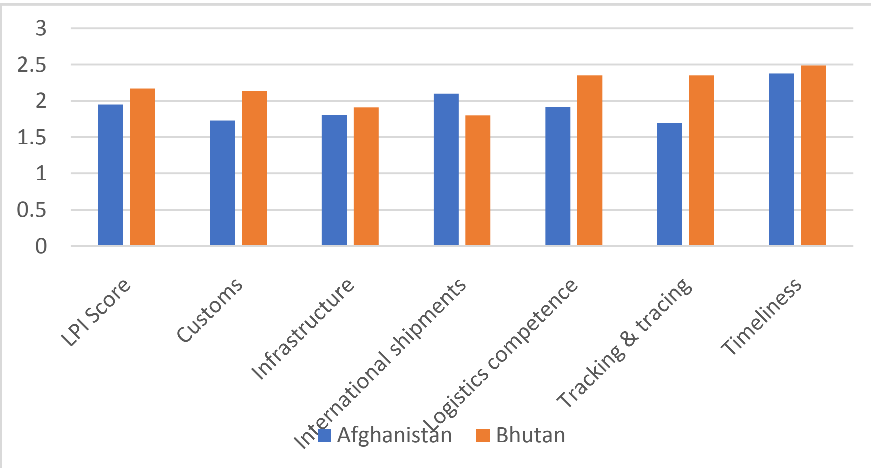
Figure 5. Value of Exported Goods as Share of GDP (2001-2014)

From "Our World in Data, Value of Exported Goods as Share of GDP – Afghanistan vs Bhutan"

In order to measure the friendliness of countries to supply chains and performance of trade corridors, the paper utilizes the Logistics Performance Index (LPI) having both quantitative and qualitative aspects of trade corridors and logistics performance of countries. According to figure 6, Bhutan has a relatively better score in its LIP in 2018, suggesting why it is better connected to GVCs.

Figure 6. Logistics Performance Index: Afghanistan vs Bhutan

From "the World Bank, Logistics Performance Index: Afghanistan vs Bhutan"



After these comparisons, we can conclude that there is a gap between Afghanistan and Bhutan in their ability to integrate into GVCs through international trade corridors. Now we should have a closer look at political economy of their trade corridors to understand the underlying reason of their success and failure.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a land-locked country in the middle of South Asia, Central Asia, and Middle East with area of almost 650,000 square kilometer and a population of about 35 million. In some geographical texts, it is considered as a Central Asian country and in other texts, it is part of Middle East, but it is mostly considered as a South Asian one.Due to this special geographical location, Afghanistan has been historically a center of trade and exchange of goods and ideas between different parts of the world.

However, in modern times and after creation of modern nation-states and the perceived importance of access to international waters, it became locked in middle of Asia and lost its reputation as a regional connection center. As a result, for importing and exporting goods, it became dependent on its two neighbors, respectively Iran to a small extent and Pakistan to a large extent. Figures 7 and 8 show Afghanistan’s visualized trade corridors from Pakistan and Iran. Table 3 exhibits the transit countries of Afghanistan and a detailed account of the different trade corridors.

Figure 7. South Asian Trade Corridors

From “Arvis et al., 2011, p. 257”

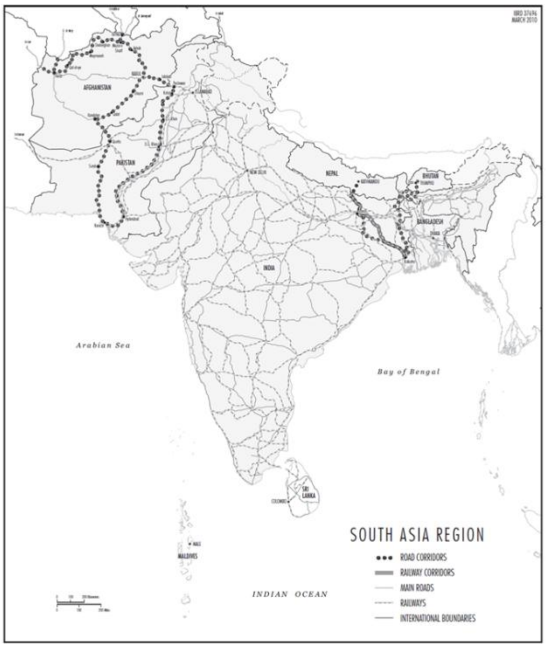
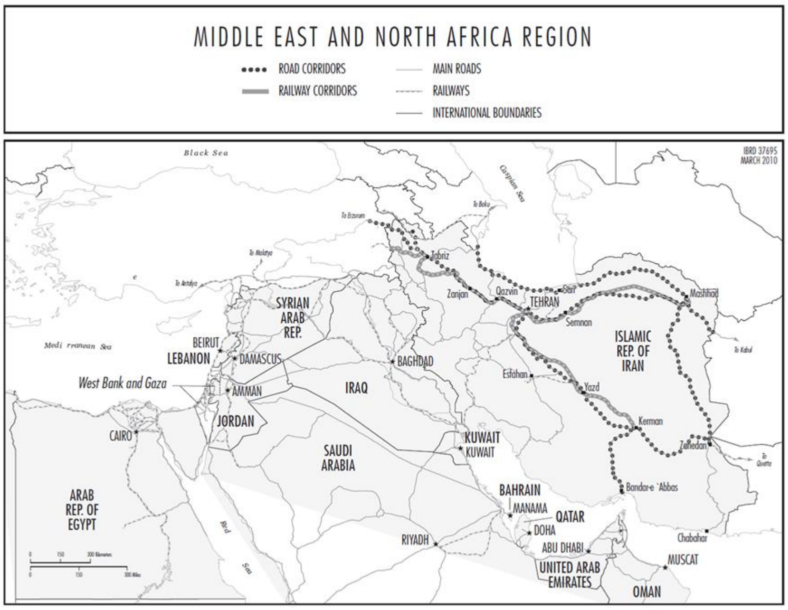


Figure 8. Middle East and North African Trade Corridors



From "Arvis et al., 2011, p. 259"

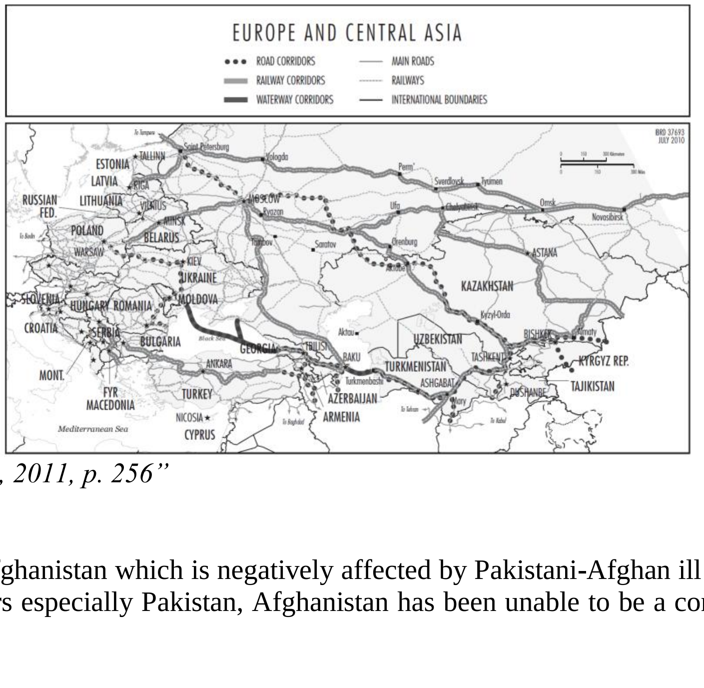
Table 3. LLDCs and Transit Countries in South Asia

Subregion	LLDCs	Transit countries	Main corridors to ports (main hubs in italic), distance	Key regional initiatives and institutions, start date
South Asia	Afghanistan	Pakistan	Kabul–Jalalabad–Torkham–Landi Kotal–Peshawar–*Karachi* (1,600 km)	Afghan Trade Transit Agreement (ATTA) (1965, modified 2004), now to be replaced by Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Agreement (APTA)
			Kabul–Kandahar–Spin Boldak–Chaman–Quetta–*Karachi* (1,500 km)	
		Iran, Islamic Rep.	Kabal–Herat–Bandar Abbas (1,200 km)	
	Nepal	India	Kathmandu–Birganj– *Kolkata/ Haldia* (1,060 km)	Indo–Nepal Treaty of Transit (1991, renewed with minor modification in 2006 for seven years)
	Bhutan	India	Thimphu–Phuentsholing–Kishanganj–*Kolkata* (800 km)	Bhutan–India Treaty of Friendship (1949)

From "Arvis et al., 2011, p. 193"

After removal of the Taliban from power by NATO in 2001, Afghanistan's condition for participation in GVCs were proper. However, there was a big problem facing the country during the abovementioned period. Due to geopolitical reasons, Pakistan as the main transit neighbor of Afghanistan closed its borders with Afghanistan many times and many MNCs and even domestic businesses were reluctant to make long-term investments for the purpose of integration of the country into GVCs (Tanzeem, 2016).

Figure 9. Europe and Central Asian Trade Corridors



From "Arvis et al., 2011, p. 256"

Moreover, it is not only Afghanistan which is negatively affected by Pakistani-Afghan ill relations. Due to political problems with its neighbors especially Pakistan, Afghanistan has been unable to be a connection point connecting

Central Asia to South Asia and vice versa. Figure 9 exhibits the difficulties the northern neighbors of Afghanistan in Central Asia are facing to be connected to global markets with passing multiple transit countries. Even though these Central Asian LLDCs currently have relatively reliable trade corridors, leverage of existing transit countries coupled with inefficiencies related to long distance of their trade corridors are two negative aspects, because of which these countries hope to have other reliable, efficient alternatives, especially through Afghanistan toward South Asia.

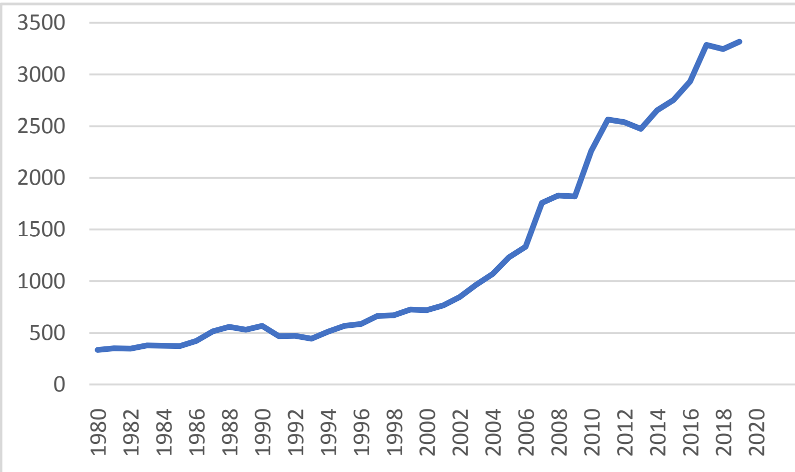
The most important factor behind weakness of Afghanistan as a LLDC to successfully join GVCs has been a political economic reason with its transit neighbors, especially Pakistan(Karimi, 2017, February 17). According to table 3, Afghanistan and Pakistan have signed multiple transit agreements, but these bilateral agreements have not been practiced and institutionalized to makesubsequent mutual commitments.Since independence of India and creation of Pakistan in 1947, Afghanistan and Pakistan have had a relationship full of tensions, as Pakistan accuse Afghanistan of having territorial claims on north-western parts of its country, whose population share ethnic ancestry withPashtuns, the most populous ethnic group in Afghanistan(Saikal, 2010). Afghanistan, since 1979, has repeatedly accused Pakistan of intervening in its internal affairs and supporting militia groups including the Taliban (Byman, 2012). As a result, they have ill relations, and Pakistan has repeatedly closed its borders with Afghanistan to impose costs on this country. To lessen the leverage of Pakistan on Afghanistan's trade, the Afghan government tried to rely on other trade corridors such as Iran to be independent of Pakistani trade corridors (Kakar, 2020). Afghanistan and Iran's agreement on access of the former to the transit routes of the latter through two different trade corridors shown in figure 8 made Afghanistan in a better position to deal with Pakistan.

Agreement between Afghanistan, Iran, and India to bypass Pakistan and Allowing Afghanistan to use the Chabahar port in Iran and trade with India through this corridor, has helped the country to gain leverage over Pakistan (Bhattacharjee, 2018). In addition, Indo-Afghan air corridor was another initiative for Afghanistan and India to bypass Pakistan (Vyas, 2017,January 9). However, these have not been so successful (CAREC, 2019)and the main flaw with all these initiatives is their high costs of transportation which stymied all the efforts(BBC Persian, 2020, November 16).

Bhutan

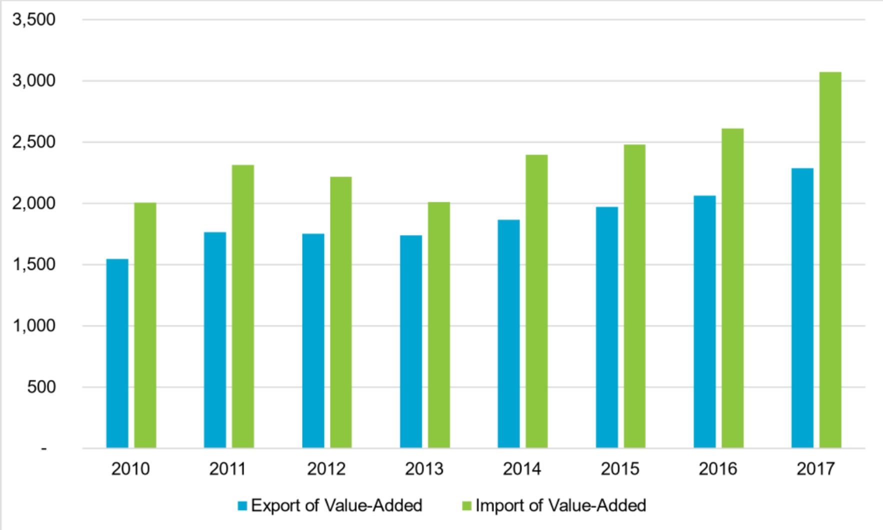
Bhutan is a small LLDC with an area of 38,394 square kilometer and a population of 750,000 located in South Asia and Eastern Himalaya. This country has a border in north with China and India in south. As figure 10 exhibits, since 1980s and especially after late 1990s, Bhutan is experiencing a rising real GDP per capita growth.

Figure 10. Real GDP per capita (Constant 2010 $US)
From "World Bank Open Data – GDP per capita: Bhutan"



According to figure 5, the value of exports as share of GDP has been more than 30% on average since then. This shows that trade has been an important multiplier of real GDP per capital growth in Bhutan. Based on figure 11, we can conclude that most part of the trade which this country had with the world was in form of value-added to GVCs, because it is a large proportion of Bhutan's real GDP. This fact suggests that Bhutan has been relatively successful to participate in GVCs and as figure 6 shows, this success has been attainable due to connectivity to global markets through its transit neighbors.

Figure 11. Trade in Value-Added, 2010–2017 ($ million)



From "Asian Development Bank, 2018, p. 65"

As figure 7exhibits, Bhutan's major transit neighbor is India, and its main trade corridor is "Kolkata–Phuentsholing." However, there is another minor trade corridor "Dhaka - Burimari - Changrabandha - Burimari – Jaigaon - Phuentsholing – Thimphu" passing through Bangladesh and India (United Nations ESCAP, 2017, p. 8).

According to table 3, India, as the major transit country of Bhutan, has a transit agreement signed in 1945 with Bhutan giving the Bhutanese traders the right to use Indian soil for movement of their goods. Due to these two countries' warm relations, they have a reliable, efficient, and institutionalized transit agreement (Asian Development Bank, 2017, p. 52) guaranteeing participation of Bhutan in GVCs (De et al., 2008, p. 16). There is such an agreement between Bhutan and Bangladesh guaranteeing movement of goods and commodities from Dhakka port to Bhutan (Ibid, p. 17). The main reason behind ability of Bhutan to secure its trade corridors and thus participate in GVCs is its warm relations with both India and Bangladesh, especially the former.

India and Bhutan cooperate always to improve their bilateral, institutionalized trade and corridor agreements in order to make the trade corridors of Bhutan more reliable and efficient. That is why compared to Afghanistan, Bhutan is better connected to GVCs and thus have a better chance of development.

Conclusion and Discussion

The political economic aspect of trade corridors is the most important factor behind ability/inability of LLDCs to reliably have access to GVCs. Public agencies and private interest groups in transit countries in the Global South have some interest calculations by which they decide how and under which conditions facilitate flows of goods to and from LLDCs. In some cases, it is the rent-seeking activities hindering trade corridors to be a reliable, efficient way of integration of LLDCs to GVCs. For instance, rent-seeking agents in transit countries try to impose their rules and regulations justifying labor-intensive transloading which make the trade corridor and integration into GVCs costly and inefficient. In some other cases, it is neighbors' historically political, military, or economiccompetitions which influences the public institutions in transit countries to obstruct LLDCs. One way which has been frequently recommended to LLDCs is to have multiple trade corridors to gain leverage over transit countries. By this strategy, different transit neighbors can benefit from trade facilitation in LLDC and thus they compete to provide the land-locked country with trade corridors, as it is a profitable service. However, efficiency is of great significance and if alternative corridors are reliable but not efficient, LLDCs will not be able to successfully participate in GVCs.

Afghanistan and Bhutan are two LLDCs in South Asia with similar geographical, physical, and infrastructural conditions, but different trade corridors, transit neighbors and thus totally different political economy of trade corridors. As a result, they show divergent paths and outcomes in pursuit of their economic policies for having access to global markets and participation in GVCs, with Afghanistan as a relatively failed case and Bhutan a relatively successful one. Bhutan has warm relations with India and Bangladesh as its major transit neighbors and thus institutionalized transit and trade agreements supporting free movement of goods from transit countries to Bhutan. Therefore, the most important factor leading to relative success of Bhutan to have reliable, efficient trade corridors to participate in GVCs is a political economic reason making its transit agreement with India and Bangladesh institutionalized, as they have warm relations and mutual interests.

However, despite highly profitable opportunities to form an inter-regional market between South and Central Asia through potential connectivity of Afghan geography, Afghanistan has been unable to secure an institutionalized, reliable transit agreement with Pakistan as its major efficient transit neighbor. Afghanistan and Pakistan have transit agreement, but it is not practiced by Pakistan, and as a result, neither the MNCs, nor Afghan government and domestic businesses trust the promises of Pakistan to allow free movement of goods to Afghanistan, as it closed the borders with Afghanistan many times to put pressure on the country.Even though Afghan government has tried effortlessly to bypass Pakistani trade corridors with the help of India through Chabahar port in Iran and air corridors, it has not been able to do so, due to high costs of alternative corridors. The most important factor behind inability of Afghanistan to have a reliable, efficient trade corridor passing through Pakistan is a political economic one, as these two neighboring countries have a long history of conflicts as a result of which, the transit agreement between the countries has not become an institutionalized agreement MNCs can rely on to invest in Afghanistan for its integration in GVCs. That is exactly why the country is today among the poorest countries of the world with 72% of its population below poverty line, making the country a favorable environment for recruitment of Jihadi groups.

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