

Joseph Nelson
Dowling Catholic High School
West Des Moines, Iowa
Afghanistan, Factor 18
Modern Silk Road: Afghanistan's Bridge to Stability

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, unfortunately, suffers from an all too-well known vicious cycle of near anarchy and great poverty. The United States federal government recently surpassed the Soviet Union in terms of total time of occupation, creeping steadily towards the eleven-year mark. Afghanistan's constantly shifting government and war-torn past and present have contributed to the state in which it exists today. War's effects are felt on the nearly 30 million people living there ("Afghanistan"). The nation's agricultural sector suffers the most from poverty and anarchy, which has led to the infamous cultivation of opium. In the past ten years, opium has become a major crop in all 34 provinces, resulting in Afghanistan becoming the world leader of opiate and providing three quarters of the global market in 2003 (Ward and Byrd). The labor-intensive cash crop provided one seventh of the total GDP in 2003. Luckily, Afghanistan's far less labor-intensive and staple crop, wheat, offers potential to become an alternative to future opium production. Furthermore, in order to effectively eradicate poppy production, Afghanistan must break its cycle of inadequate governance and poor economic stability. Such a maneuver is possible through the invigoration of a drastically improved infrastructure. Infrastructure lies at the heart of every nation's economic vitality, and Afghanistan is no exception. Specifically, rural farmers struggling to successfully integrate themselves into the national, and ultimately global, economy would find unparalleled improvements in their standard of life.

The rural population of Afghanistan is dominant, as only 23% of the total population lives in an urban setting ("Afghanistan"). Families are the basic unit of production in agriculture. An average household frequently consists of a man, his wife, their sons and spouses, and all unmarried daughters. When the father of the family passes, the sons may continue to live together in the home, or split assets to go their separate ways (Countries and their Cultures: Afghanistan). The splitting of resources among sons of a family is determined through economic ability and skills. The roles of the family also follow strict gender binaries. Much like in the United States before the women's rights movement, women in Afghanistan face domestic roles. They are predestined for cooking, taking care of the children, and sometimes weaving, sewing, and making rugs. Men are left to taking care of livestock and the crops through plowing, cultivating, and harvesting. These gender roles are so engrained that men are not allowed to be in the home during the day to encourage work and to avoid the questioning of their masculinity.

Rural family diet does not differ much from that of urban populations in the country, with the exception that more rice is eaten in urban environments. An everyday meal will include flatbread, which may be dipped in a light meat stock (Countries and their Cultures: Afghanistan). Dairy products also represent an important portion of an Afghanistan diet, including products like yogurt, butter, cream, and dried butter. Additionally, peas and beans, onions, dried fruits, and nuts are common foods of the diet. Customary drinks include tea with sugar, water, and buttermilk. However, about 61% of the rural population does not have potable water, thus commonly spreading waterborne diseases. The Islamic culture of Afghanistan also plays a role in their diets, as alcohol is forbidden, in addition the only meats consumed are from animals slaughtered according to Islamic law; and pork and wild boar are never consumed.

Overall health in Afghanistan, unfortunately, ranks near the worst in the world. Specifically, in the rural village of Deh Magas nestled in the snow-capped Pamir Mountains, hospital access is nearly nonexistent ("Legacy of hardship"). Pregnancy is nearly a death sentence in the village, reinforcing Afghanistan's 1,600 deaths per 100,000 births, the second worst in the world. Edward Carwardine remarks, "We now have better hospitals in some of the cities and more women are receiving emergency obstetric care, but

over the next five years we have to concentrate on the rural areas” (“Legacy of Hardship”). Infrastructure remains a key factor in the lack of professional healthcare. Wakhila Karim, a gynecologist who works in a 20-bed maternity ward at the hospital in Faizabad states, “The roads are so bad, people are so poor and there are no clinics and hospitals in the villages. It is a recipe for disaster” (“Legacy of Hardship”). And that recipe, unfortunately, is one of the few that has the adequate ingredients to provide a full meal. Dr. Karim continues by claiming that malnutrition is such a tremendous problem that women’s pelvises may contract to become so thin that childbirth becomes unsafe. Furthermore, women may experience vitamin D deficiencies due to their lack of sunlight from being forced to stay in the home all day. Those problems exacerbate themselves even more in the southern Pashtun districts. Hospital access may take up to 12 days in the most remote areas. Dr. Karim remains optimistic, however, due to the improvement in conditions since 2002.

Health conditions cannot make great advances until agriculture does in Afghanistan, however, due to many conditions stemming from malnutrition. Agriculture currently drives the nation’s economy, just as it has historically. Although levels of agricultural output have not equaled the 50% of the GDP that they were before the Soviet Invasion in 1979, agriculture is on the rise for economic vitality (“Afghanistan – Agriculture”). Crops that fare well in Afghanistan include corn, rice, barley, and wheat. Wheat is the principal food crop in the nation. Major industrial crops include cotton, tobacco, sugar beets, and castor beans. Farmers commonly grow subsistence crops alongside these industrial cash crops and unfortunately, thus frequently include poppy seed plants for opium production. Opium production reached 4600 metric tons in 1999, but, in 2001, the Taliban supreme religious leader Mullah Omar condemned it as impermissible by Islamic law (“Afghanistan – Agriculture”). The production has since continued, however, due to deteriorating economic conditions.

The United States’ continuing counterinsurgency leaves rural Afghani farmers in a tough position. To fight Taliban insurgents, much like the Vietcong in Vietnam, the U.S. must be able to secure its gains from rogue insurgents among the local population. This counterinsurgency strategy also relies on having positive relations with the local population, to win their hearts and minds so that the U.S. may win the War on Terror and stop civilians from joining or supporting the insurgents (Wendle). The rural farmers are routinely searched; they routinely have an encroachment on their personal property for a weapons-cache sweep. In the process of searching, troops may trample newly planted okra plants, crushing them into the muck. An explosives team may detonate a cache of Soviet-era mines, destroying trees from a pomegranate orchard (Wendle). Setbacks like these seem minor to the soldiers whose ultimate job is to uphold security; however, such losses may result in detrimental losses to rural farmers. Issues with personal relationships and security gains lead Jesse Wolfe, State Department adviser in the Arghandab region with development experience and a former infantry captain in the Marine Corps who served two tours in Afghanistan, to summarize, “We haven’t fought a 10-year war, we’ve fought 10 one-year wars” (Wendle). Not all politics are localized, but, instead, are personalized. The solution is not to withdraw U.S. counterinsurgency to allow farmers to grow in peace because the alternative to U.S. resentment is a Taliban sanctuary, reversing progress. Thus, Afghanistan faces a catch-22 scenario: the United States withdraws their forces and Taliban insurgents run rampant, crushing any hopes of stable agriculture, or United States presence brings Vietnam-era reminiscent resentment.

The main roadblock to overall economic and agricultural security is not the presence of foreign forces on Afghanistan’s arable soil, however. It is the lack of infrastructure. Every industrialized economy relies on successful infrastructure to quickly transport goods from the producer to the seller. Geographically, Afghanistan has much to gain from a successful infrastructure. With a growing Asian superpower market to the east and a near connection to Europe on the west, Afghanistan has potential to be the Interstate 80 of Central Asia. Andrew Kuchins, Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Strategic International Studies Russia and Eurasia Program, recognizes the potential Afghanistan holds for future economic development:

Afghanistan is a country with significant potential for economic development. It . . . is well positioned to become a trade and business hub linking the markets of Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, and China. The potential exists for sustainable economic growth in the future. . . . Afghanistan's commercial connections to regional and global economies were severely disrupted and must be redeveloped. The development of a competitive private sector will depend on establishing access to foreign markets and developing viable export activities (Kuchins et al).

Kuchins, among other scholars at CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program, recognizes that the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) was established with the intent to deliver nonlethal goods to military forces in Afghanistan; however, the NDN grants the opportunity to further the military's goals of stability through the construction of a Modern Silk Road spanning the length of Afghanistan, much like the Ancient Silk Road of a past millennia. Kuchins defends this stating, "the United States will ultimately fail in Afghanistan if it does not pay high-level attention to the country's future role in regional economic activity" (Kuchins et al). Without a long-term strategy for stability after the United States leaves Afghanistan, the entire mission may be reversed. Thus, the United States federal government must substantially increase its efforts to develop the Modern Silk Road in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is the missing link in a Eurasian continental trade and transport system that will benefit, not only local agriculture, but overall regional political and economic security. A United Nations study estimated that if a Modern Silk Road were constructed in Afghanistan, the gross domestic product across Central Asia would increase an astonishing 50% (Kuchins et al). Overall trade in the region would increase an estimated \$12 billion, or 80%, and trade between Afghanistan and its neighbors would increase 160%. Furthermore, the benefits would be felt most strongly at home where estimates conclude that Afghanistan's exports may increase 14%, or \$5.8 billion, and Afghanistan's own GDP would experience at least an 8.8% rise. With such positive rises in economics, the vicious cycle of poverty and political turmoil may be broken, allowing overall stability to increase, thereby ensuring food security increases.

In addition to increasing Afghanistan's raw economic potential, a Modern Silk Road would greatly expedite the rate at which foreign forces could leave the nation and still guarantee stability. Just as crushing okras and pomegranate orchards destroys the hearts and minds of the local population, construction of a new passageway to economic prosperity offers the potential to win the hearts and minds of local farmers, decreasing their incentive to join Taliban forces. The scenario is similar to that of tsunami aid in Japan. When natives see foreign occupiers in uniform performing humanitarian aid, it substantially increases the United States' diplomatic appeal and legitimizes their presence. Development must begin at a grassroots level and alongside a strong military occupation (Corcoran). Building a passageway through Afghanistan not only creates a path for trade, but it also provides a path to future political and sustainable economic prosperity.

Within the status quo, many countries, private sector enterprises, and countries are spending billions to construct "Modern Silk Roads running from Hamburg to Hanoi, Mumbai to Morocco" (Starr et al). Such efforts face a bottleneck situation in Afghanistan, however. Key border areas prevent the progression of roads, railroads, oil and gas pipelines, and electrical lines. Such closed border policies are embedded in Afghanistan's security, whether stemming from past Soviet occupation, civil war and Taliban rule in the nation, or now during the current unrest along the Pakistani border. If Hamid Karzai's administration in Afghanistan lessened restrictions and empirically tight borders, Afghanistan would be able to flourish economically, instead of being isolated from world commerce and condemned to both extreme internal instability and solutions (Starr et al).

The rural farming population would benefit most from a new source of transportation. With a new source of commerce, the risk of food insecurity would decrease. Not only could rural farmers have increased

access to importing foods, but also the guaranteed profits of exporting food. When farmers are able to adequately produce and sell their wheat, they are far less likely to turn to the labor-intensive cash crop, opium. Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, author of *Opium: Uncovering the Politics of the Poppy*, recognizes the direct correlation, stating, “Opium production is largely resorted to as a way to cope with food insecurity” (Arnoldy). Mr. Chouvy notes that when farmers have less wheat, they turn to opium because the cash crop provides some kind of financial stability and has a guaranteed market. Additionally, when wheat prices rise, rural farmers use opium profits to purchase it. If farmers are able to get their wheat to a market and become less reliant on trafficking opium, then the profits that some insurgents make from poppy production will see a decrease (Arnoldy). Additionally, if a new way of reaching rural populations is produced, farmers would be more apt to turn to wheat because it is far less labor intensive, as poppy requires around 350 person days per hectare, while wheat is only about 41 person days per hectare (World Bank).

Opium production, and, thus, the agricultural reforms necessary to decrease it, is Afghanistan’s greatest weakness, not the Taliban. Comparatively, “Afghanistan's most serious problem is not the Taliban, it is the alarming growth of its economic dependence on narcotics. It now permeates nearly every aspect of Afghan society and underwrites much of the violence we are fighting throughout the nation. It is Afghanistan's true ‘Achilles' Heal’” [SIC] (Jones). It is vital to ensure that farmers can economically grow and sell legal produce if Afghanistan is to prevent itself from becoming a full-fledged narcotic state. Afghanistan’s economy does not currently require poppy production, but the nation is on the course to becoming that way (Jones). With poppy seed production threatening to increase at a higher rate than its 164% increase in 2010, swift action must be taken (Arnoldy).

There are those who may argue that the Northern Distribution Network’s construction of a Modern Silk Road would fail due to warring unrest, and, even if successful, simply serve as an express line for opium production to its biggest market in Europe. While it is true that insecurity inevitably inhibits economic activity and dissuades investment that could drive regional growth, it is also important to note that the continuing flow of Pakistani trucks with NATO supplies through the Pashtun insurgency is proof that commercial activity may flourish amid instability (Kuchins et al). It is clear that any disruption of supply lines is outweighed by economic potential, and, as long as incentives for such structures hold, populations will value commerce over political violence due to capital gains being in everyone’s best interest (Kuchins et al). Concerns that a Modern Silk Road would simply be used for an opium autobahn seem legitimate; however, a few intuitive solutions rectify any qualms. First, if rural farmers are given the opportunity to be able to finally produce wheat on a national level and production only requires about an eighth of the labor force, standard cost-benefit analysis would imply farmers will choose to mass produce wheat as a cash crop (World Bank). Secondly, just as United States counterinsurgency forces are training the Afghanistan National Army to successfully police cities, they could equally be stationed at check points along the Modern Silk Road to crackdown on its illicit use.

Afghanistan’s wheat production may not only hinge on its ability to find adequate markets to purchase, however. In coming years, Central Asia faces great water scarcity issues that especially may compromise the security of Afghanistan especially. The Amu Darya is one of two major rivers in the region, and Afghanistan shares its basin with Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations). During the Soviet Union’s control, a centralized power was able to regulate river management, but ever since its dissolution, the nations’ self-interests have taken hold. Such a situation leaves nearly no monitoring force over the use of rivers, ultimately threatening overall water distribution in the region. The United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations has identified water scarcity as the most probable source of conflict in the coming century for Central Asian countries. Centralized policy solutions will be required to maintain peace and the adequate distribution of water for agriculture will ensure the overall well-being of involved nations (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations).

Afghanistan is approaching a cross-road in agricultural production. The war-torn nation must reverse its past thirty year trend of nearly incessant turmoil to focus on increasing political and economic stability. A number of factors affect the nation's future, but none will prove greater than its improvements in infrastructure to foster a better market for legal crop production, notably wheat. Without adequately addressing the nation's main source of economic turmoil, all successes of the past ten year occupation by the United States will be nullified socially, politically, and economically. The construction of a Modern Silk Road is the vital internal link to future economic growth, for the region, for the nation, and for rural Afghani farmers. Without a substantial revamping of the wheat market, Afghanistan may become a permanently a narcotic dependent state, relying on illegal poppy production to unjustly prop up corrupt governance and reinforce poverty. The Islamic of Afghanistan is a land of foreign occupation but will one day have to stand alone, yet ultimately, "In the end, if the opportunity offered by the Modern Silk Road is ignored, everything the United States will have achieved in Afghanistan will be short-lived, and instability will likely remain a permanent fixture in the heart of Eurasia" (Kuchins et al).

Works Cited

- "Afghanistan Agriculture, Information about Agriculture in Afghanistan." *Encyclopedia of the Nations - Information about Countries of the World, United Nations, and World Leaders*. Web. 27 Aug. 2011. <<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Asia-and-the-Pacific/Afghanistan-AGRICULTURE.html>>.
- Arnoldy, Ben. "Afghanistan Poppy Production Could Skyrocket Due to Spike in Prices, Drought - CSMonitor.com." *The Christian Science Monitor - CSMonitor.com*. 21 Jan. 2011. Web. 20 July 2011. <<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2011/0121/Afghanistan-poppy-production-could-skyrocket-due-to-spike-in-prices-drought>>.
- "AVOIDING WATER WARS: WATER SCARCITY AND CENTRAL ASIA'S GROWING IMPORTANCE FOR STABILITY IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN." *COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS UNITED STATES SENATE* (2011): 1-6. Print.
- Corcoran, Ed. "Strategic Dialogue: Afghanistan | FPIF." *Foreign Policy In Focus | International Affairs, Peace, Justice, and Environment*. Foreign Policy in Focus, 15 Oct. 2009. Web. 25 July 2011. <http://www.fpif.org/articles/strategic_dialogue_afghanistan>.
- "Culture of Afghanistan - History, People, Clothing, Women, Beliefs, Food, Customs, Family, Social." *Countries and Their Cultures*. Web. 22 Aug. 2011. <<http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Afghanistan.html>>.
- Document of the World Bank. *Afghanistan Poverty, Vulnerability and Social Protection: An Initial Assessment*. Publication. The World Bank, 7 Mar. 2007. Web. 4 Sept. 2011. <http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2005/03/22/000012009_20050322100004/Rendered/PDF/296940AF.pdf>.
- Jones, James. "CQ Congressional Testimony." *CQ Congressional Testimony*. 1 Mar. 2007. Web. 22 June 2011.
- Kuchins, Andrew C., Thomas M. Sanderson, and David A. Gordon. "Afghanistan: Building the Missing Link in the Modern Silk Road." *THE WASHINGTON QUARTERLY*. Apr. 2010. Web. 24 July 2011. <http://www.twq.com/10april/docs/10apr_KuchinsSandersonGordon.pdf>.
- "Legacy of Hardship." *Emory Libraries Resources Off Campus Access Login*. South China Morning Post, 9 May 2006. Web. 2 Sept. 2011.

<<http://www.lexisnexis.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/lnacui2api/auth/checkbrowser.do?rand=0.2806864560035033>>.

Starr, S. Frederick, and Andrew C. Kuchins. "The Key to Success in Afghanistan A Modern Silk Road Strategy." *Central Asia - Caucasus Institute*. 2010. Web. 25 Aug. 2011.
<<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/1005Afghan.pdf>>.

United States. Central Intelligence Agency. *Afghanistan*. 1 Jan. 2010. Web. 2 Sept. 2011.
<<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>>.

Wendle, John. "Afghan Counterinsurgency: When Everything Is Personal - TIME." *Breaking News, Analysis, Politics, Blogs, News Photos, Video, Tech Reviews - TIME.com*. Time Magazine, 19 Aug. 2011. Web. 19 Aug. 2011. <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2089185,00.html>>.

The World Bank. *AFGHANISTAN'S OPIUM DRUG ECONOMY*. Publication no. 31149. The World Bank, Dec. 2004. Web. 4 Sept. 2011.
<http://www.wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2005/01/06/000012009_20050106091108/Rendered/PDF/311490PAPER0AF100SASPR0no051Dec0171.pdf>.