

Coalition Eyes 'Silk Road' to Boost Afghan Economy

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NEW YORK — The United States and its allies want to revive the ancient "silk road" running across Central Asia as a way of preparing Afghanistan's economy for after 2014, when coalition forces pull out of the country.

In a conference held on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly late last week, about 25 countries ranging from Iran to China and Saudi Arabia met to discuss how Southern and Central Asian countries could become more interlinked through trade, transit and energy ties.

"As coalition combat forces leave Afghanistan, the support structure that has grown up will shrink, and it will mean fewer jobs for Afghans and a loss for the Afghan economy," U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said.

"If we don't pledge ourselves to a new economic vision for the region, I don't think a more prosperous future is likely."

Nearly 10 years after the Taliban government was toppled, foreign forces led by the United States and NATO have been unable to deal a decisive blow to neutralize the militant group.

The Afghan government remains weak and notoriously corrupt, billions of dollars of foreign aid have yielded meager results, and violence continues throughout the country.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, who co-chaired the event, said the initiative would be part of a package that was being worked on for an international peace conference on Afghanistan to be held in December in Germany.

Traditionally, the silk routes saw merchants traveling from China to Turkey, carrying everything from precious gems to textiles and spices.

Its modern-day version would involve boosting cross-border economic activity through schemes such as the Trans-Afghanistan project, a natural gas pipeline that would run from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan, Pakistan and into India.

Clinton said she hoped that the new silk road would convince Afghanistan's regional neighbors that their stability and prosperity was inherently linked to that of Afghanistan.

That may well prove to be a hard sell in the immediate term with tensions already strained between the United States and Pakistan over Afghanistan policies.

"Let's be honest, any of this to be successful will require a change in attitude and sustained commitment of political will," Clinton said. "To attract more private investment, the nations of the region need to offer lasting security and stability, and that means putting aside old enmities and rivalries and focusing on opportunities not just threats."

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