

An Explorative Probe into Pakistan's Engagement with Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

Aims of the Study: This study aims to answer the questions like what is the existing level of engagement and interregional connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia, and what are its prospects?

Methodology: The study has been conducted through descriptive and analytical methodologies; data is collected from secondary sources and analyzed through content analysis technique.

Findings: Pakistan is providing the shortest route to Central Asia to connect it with the international market, energy export corridor, and smooth connectivity increase the volume of trade between the two regions. The entire regional trade is expected to expand by 160 per cent after completion of the corridors linking the two regions. The smooth connectivity will also help resolve the energy crisis in Pakistan through TAPI and CASA.

Conclusion: Landlocked Central Asia has numerous strategic resources and economic opportunities, which are the leverages in regional politics. While Pakistan is an energy deficit country, it has good seaports and potentially acts as the land bridge between Central Asia and South Asia to improve its trade deficits. Therefore, engagement and interregional connectivity of both sides are apparently beneficial for strengthening multi-level economic cooperation, political stability and security needs.

Keywords: Pakistan, Central Asia, Relations, Regional Connectivity.

Article History

Received:
December 25, 2022

Revised:
February 23, 2023

Accepted:
February 24, 2023

Published:
March 1, 2023

Introduction

The history of Pakistan's relations with Central Asia dates back to the second century because the nomadic people of the two regions had social, religious, and economic relations. Scythians, a tribe of Central Asia arrived from the current Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan areas to the present-day Pakistani area via Pamir (Gilgit Baltistan) and reached up to the Taxila region of Pakistan. Thus, over the time links between the Central Asian region and sub-continent became strong. Peshawar, which is a city of present-day Pakistan, also remained the capital of the Kushan dynasty of Central Asia, which was called "Purshapura" at that time. The "Shalwar Kameez" was also introduced in this region in that period which later on turned into the national dress of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Shaheen, 2011). To renew its

centuries-old relations and connectivity, right after the disintegration of the USSR and the emergence of Central Asian Republics (CARs) the Government of Pakistan sent a delegation of high-level officials led by the then Economic Affairs Minister of Pakistan Sardar Asif Ahmad Ali. He was accompanied by government officials, industrialists, private businessmen and journalists to visit Central Asian Republics to establish formal relations with them. Pakistan and Central Asia's bilateral relations are generally based on common history, religion, cultural values, ethnicity, tradition and territorial closeness.

Pakistan has determined some specific economic and political goals based on mutual interests and benefits, unlike some other regional countries whose interests are to dominate the region and keep CARs away from having good relations with other countries. Both the regions are interdependent which compels them to come close and work together. Central Asia is offering Pakistan to be a regional trade hub as it is a landlocked region, cheap energy resources, finding new markets for its energy resources, bilateral trade, cheap raw materials, many political prospects as well as support on different international forms among other things. While Pakistan is offering seaports to Central Asia to give it the shortest access route to the international market, opportunities to export energy resources to the South Asian market, which is importing huge amount of energy resources from the Middle East, South Africa and the US.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A good research design helps to assurance that the research techniques used in study are in line with objectives and answer the research questions using reliable data. It enables to find accurate findings. For this study, the time period of post-independence (1991-2020) has been chosen because during this period Pakistan's get engaged and established close relationship Central Asia. Pakistan's increased engagement proved to be beneficial for both regions.

Data Collection Method

The study has been conducted through descriptive and analytical methodologies to explore the increased engagement of Pakistan with Central Asia and draw a valid and a comprehensive conclusion of Pakistan's engagement with Central Asia. Both are well established social sciences research techniques. A comprehensive review of the existing literature on Islamabad relations with these five newly independent countries has been studied to obtain a broader understanding of the factors that contributed to the main research problem examined in this study. The data and facts and figure are gained from secondary sources included books, journal articles, magazines, newspapers and reports.

Data Analysis Technique

Content analysis technique (CAT) has been used to find the answers of the questions of this research study. In qualitative research in social sciences and humanities, CAT is a commonly used and acknowledged method (Khayyam et al., 2018). Since 19th century, it has been used as an important method in social sciences (Harwood and Garry, 2003). Additionally, using a realistic perspective, this method offers the opportunity to comprehend insightful analyses from various secondary data sources (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Researchers can review and analysis a wide range of data quantity using CAT in a rationally easy and organized manner. It helps to condense a large range data into small themes groups, undeniably helps to get more accurate and reliable results.

Results and Discussion

Importance of Central Asia for Pakistan

Following the rise of the five independent nations in the region, the fundamental dynamics of attention of other countries towards the region has changed due to its vast number of natural reservoirs and geostrategic significance. This region has a vast quantity of natural resources as well as rich in metals (Dook International, 2016), which attract other countries. As far as the worth of Central Asia in the

context of natural resources is concerned, from among the 118 periodic-table elements, 99 are available in Central Asia including gold, uranium, tungsten, silver, molybdenum, magnesium, zinc, chromite, lead, copper, fluorides and bohrium (Khwaja, 2003). Central Asia possesses 2.4 per cent (31.2 thousand million barrels) of the world's oil and produces 4.2 per cent (20.2 billion cubic meters) of the world's gas (Javaid and Rashid, 2015). Pakistan is an energy-hungry country and Central Asia is a big source of energy as it possesses a massive quantity of natural energy reserves. Therefore, the region possesses excessive geo-economics significance for its peripheral regions including Pakistan.

Central Asia also has many opportunities for trade, energy export potentials and FDI destinations; therefore, Pakistan has many economic interests in the region. At present, Pakistan is facing serious energy crisis and export deficits which lead to an economic crisis in the country. Central Asia can help to solve the energy crisis as well as widely boost the international trade of Pakistan up and prove to be a very good market for Pakistani products. The region is adjacent and a cost-effective source of energy supply to Pakistan and a big market for Pakistani goods. Islamabad recently signed and initiated two energy schemes with Central Asia i-e the TAPI pipeline scheme signed in 2002 to import gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan, and the second project is CASA-1,000 to import electricity to Pakistan (Humayun, 2016). Turkmenistan is offering natural gas to Pakistan while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have huge potential for hydroelectric power. Pakistan direly needs both gas and electricity.

Pakistan can become a transit economic power through Gwadar and its closeness to the Persian Gulf, which is producing 65 per cent oil of the world. Pakistan's Gwadar port is also adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz through which half of the world's total oil supply is carried out. In this respect, CPEC has the capacity to prove an advanced level of economic connectivity in the entire region and the Gwadar port is likely to become a gateway to connect China, Pakistan, and CARs with the other parts of the world. Pakistan has realized its geo-strategic position in the framework of CARs and shaped durable ties with CARs and offered all kinds of possible help, support and aid. In the beginning, the Central Asian Republics had not a warm relationship with Pakistan but slowly and gradually these countries started understanding the necessity that only Pakistan is an alternative solution to their land-locked nature. In this regard, another important aspect is China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It is aimed to connect East Asia, Central Asia, Middle East, South Asia, Europe and Africa through sea and land routes (Rauf, 2018). It is helpful for neighboring states and regions, especially CARs. CPEC is one of the most important projects of Chinese BRI. Pakistan's relationship with CARs provided opportunities for Central Asian countries to utilize the economic potential of the inter-regional connectivity of Gwadar to Kashgar through CPEC (Javaid and Rashid, 2016).

Islamabad's relationship with Central Asian Republics has mainly been a crucial component of the idea of a "Greater Central Asia Vision" attempting to put together 3 objectives: First; to strengthen mutual as well as regional links built on shared identity i.e., Islam, second, exploiting prospect to advance strategic depth against the New Delhi and third, to pursue a common advantageous partnership. Pakistan pursued to emphasize its Islamic identity as the base for moulding emerging alignments in CARs (Humayun, 2016). In the changing global and regional geopolitical situations, Pakistan and Russia are now coming closer to each other in Central Asia as well as in Afghanistan which helped the approach of Pakistan to secure its interests in Central Asia. Their close relations have stimulated CARs for larger collaboration with Islamabad (Khan and Khan, 2019).

The engagement and connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia have many prospects for both the region but they are facing many challenges to get connected smoothly and implement the signed projects. Despite historic links, religious and spiritual harmonies and territorial proximity, bilateral relations between Pakistan and Central Asia are yet not smooth and cordial due to different reasons. They have initiated many joint economic and energy supply projects but cannot be materialized mostly because of the worst law and order conditions in Afghanistan which is situated between the two regions. The most serious challenge in the context of materialization of its connectivity is the unavailability of a common boundary between Pakistan and any other Central Asian country. Another challenge is that the majority of

the ruling elite of CARs are pro-Russia and Russia has deep influence in CARs, therefore, in absence of a friendly relationship with Moscow, Islamabad will continue to face challenges in Central Asia in fulfilling its interests (Asif, 2011). Central Asia has huge political, socio-economic, geographical, cultural, and geostrategic importance, which gave birth to power politics among regional as well as extra-regional players having a stake hold in Central Asia (Adnan and Fatima, 2015). The New Great Game and the politics of big powers in the region have also created challenges for Islamabad to establish cordial relations, get maximum benefits from their natural reservoirs and advance its interests in Central Asia. Furthermore, contrasting objectives of different stakeholders in Afghanistan worked as serious issues that influenced Pak-CARs mutual interests and materializations of its trade agreements and energy projects. The presence of India in the region is also a challenge to Pakistan as it has been working to counter Islamabad in the region. The terrorist organizations are active in Central Asia; most importantly the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is a threat to the engagement of Pakistan in the region (Hashimy, 2014). This organization operates in Central Asia and Afghanistan associated with Al-Qaeda, Afghan Taliban and Pakistan Taliban involved in many attacks on Pakistani interests and its citizens.

The Interregional Connectivity and its Prospects

Regional connectivity is essential for regional development and integration. In recent decades, the idea of regionalism has resurfaced to supplant the idea of a globalized society, which has been gradually losing momentum since the early excitement after the ending of the Cold War. The world began to reorganize itself along new lines as states solidified their policies and stances in regional coalitions and blocs based on similar political and economic interests, rather than being motivated by ideological affinities with a big power thousands of kilometers away. Countries began prioritizing regional integration and moved toward regionalism. In particular, Pakistan is an interesting case study in regionalism since it is situated at the crossroad of three major regions: South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia. The country is in a unique position where it can act as an economic, political, and social gateway among the three regions, touching the boundaries of South Asia, and the Middle East and being detached from Central Asia in the north-west by the Wakhan Corridor, a 16-kilometre-wide strip of territory. All the three regions have extensive influence on the history, language, culture, traditions, and politics which are playing important role in establishing and strengthening regionalism. Geographically, Tajikistan is the nearest country to Pakistan among CARs. Wakhan corridor is the shortest and comparatively safe trade link that can connect the two regions.

Regional connectivity is a very broad and dynamic phenomenon that includes several aspects such as strategic, economic, social, and political cooperation. It has acquired profound significance throughout the world, particularly in the Central and South Asian context (Contessi, 2013). A major element of the success story of industrialized countries is the advanced regional integration which has performed a significant role in their whole growth and sustainability. A durable and well-organized regional connection is critical for every country's peace, development, and prosperity. According to modern political principles, Pakistan is no exception in this sense. The regional connectivity and integration between the two regions are critical as it would provide several advantages for the growth of economic and political goals of Pakistan. Therefore, improving regional connectivity is one of the major priorities of the country.

Central Asia has served as a gateway for the exchange of individuals, ideas, and products, between Asia and Europe for centuries due to its close ties to the Silk Road trade routes. As Pakistan is situated at the crossroad between South and Central Asia, make it impossible for Central Asian Countries to ignore its geographical and geopolitical importance. The country's geopolitical position provides it with an advantage over other regional countries when it comes to promoting business links with CARs. Due to this important geostrategic location, Pakistan has a good opportunity to serve as a bridge connecting diverse areas and give easy access to this landlocked region. Pakistan is in a beneficial position because of its geographic position which can make it a trade hub and energy transportation route to South Asia.

Landlocked Central Asia is full of natural resources, which has increased the importance of Pakistan in the region since the beginning (Wasi, 2002).

At present, regionalization is very important in mutually beneficial partnerships everywhere in the world. In this regard, South Asia and Central Asia also have no exception. As Central Asia has abundance of natural resources which may be exported to other countries, making it a viable market for trade and guaranteeing the energy security of countries in periphery. The geographic position of Pakistan makes the country a potential conduit for energy corridors connecting Central Asia and South Asia. Furthermore, Central Asia is landlocked, it requires access to seaports in order to import and export goods to other countries. In this respect, the Gwadar seaport has the potential to become a commercial transit center for Central Asia (Anwar, 2008). Pakistan is an important South Asian country and a key player in regional affairs. Inter-regional connectivity is beneficial both for Pakistan and Central Asian Republics in terms of economic activities, trade, energy security, political alliance, and strategic partnerships. Central Asia's quest for warm water, New Great Game and because of the geo-economics' strategy of different players involved in the region, CARs find it hard to transfer their gas and oil via the Arabian Sea (Jamil, 2017). Gwadar's deep seaport and Wakhan Corridor are the most suitable choices for CARs to trade their oil, gas and other commodities to the international market. In this context, Islamabad is attempting to get more importance by proposing several commercial and transportation routes, as well as giving access to CARs to its seaports. For landlocked Central Asian countries, Pakistan is the shortest and perhaps very convenient trading route to sea for its international trade via sea. The ports of Pakistan are offering CARs with vital transportation and shipment facilities. Karachi port is the nearest port to all CARs. If Pakistan and the Central Asian Republic become close friends, it will be defiantly a win-win scenario for them because they will be mutually beneficial.

The shortest route to the sea for Turkmenistan and southern Uzbekistan is via Iran, whereas the shortest route to the sea for the other Central Asian nations is through Pakistan. Karachi is Central Asia's closest port city, while by air, Islamabad is nearer to Tashkent than Karachi. Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan is merely one hour by air from Islamabad, while the distance between Karachi and Dushanbe is 2,720 km via road through Afghanistan. Bandar Abbas port is on 3,400 km distance, Vladivostok is on 9,500 km distance, and Rostov is on 4,200 km distance from Central Asia (Table 1) (Rashid, 1994). Consequently, Pakistan emerges as a country of significance for the CARs. It is continuously attempting to enhance its link to Central Asia through Afghanistan and China, despite little progress so far. The country is long been interested in increasing regional connectivity and serving as a link between landlocked CARs and other parts of the world.

Table 1: *Distances Between Different Trade Hubs, Port Cities in Pakistan, Central Asia, and Russia.*

From	To	Distance	From	To	Distance
Islamabad	Dushanbe	640 km	Abadan	Dushanbe	3200 km
Islamabad	Tashkent	800 km	Karachi	Dushanbe	2720 km
Islamabad	Bishkek	960 km	Odessa	Dushanbe	3400 km
Islamabad	Alma Ata	1040 km	Bandar Abbas	Dushanbe	3440 km
Karachi	Lahore	1292 km	Gwadar	Karachi	489 km
Tashkent	Chaman	1292 km	Vladivostok	Dushanbe	9500 km

Source: Shameem Akhtar, "Strategic Significance of Central Asia," *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 45, No.3, (1992), p. 49.

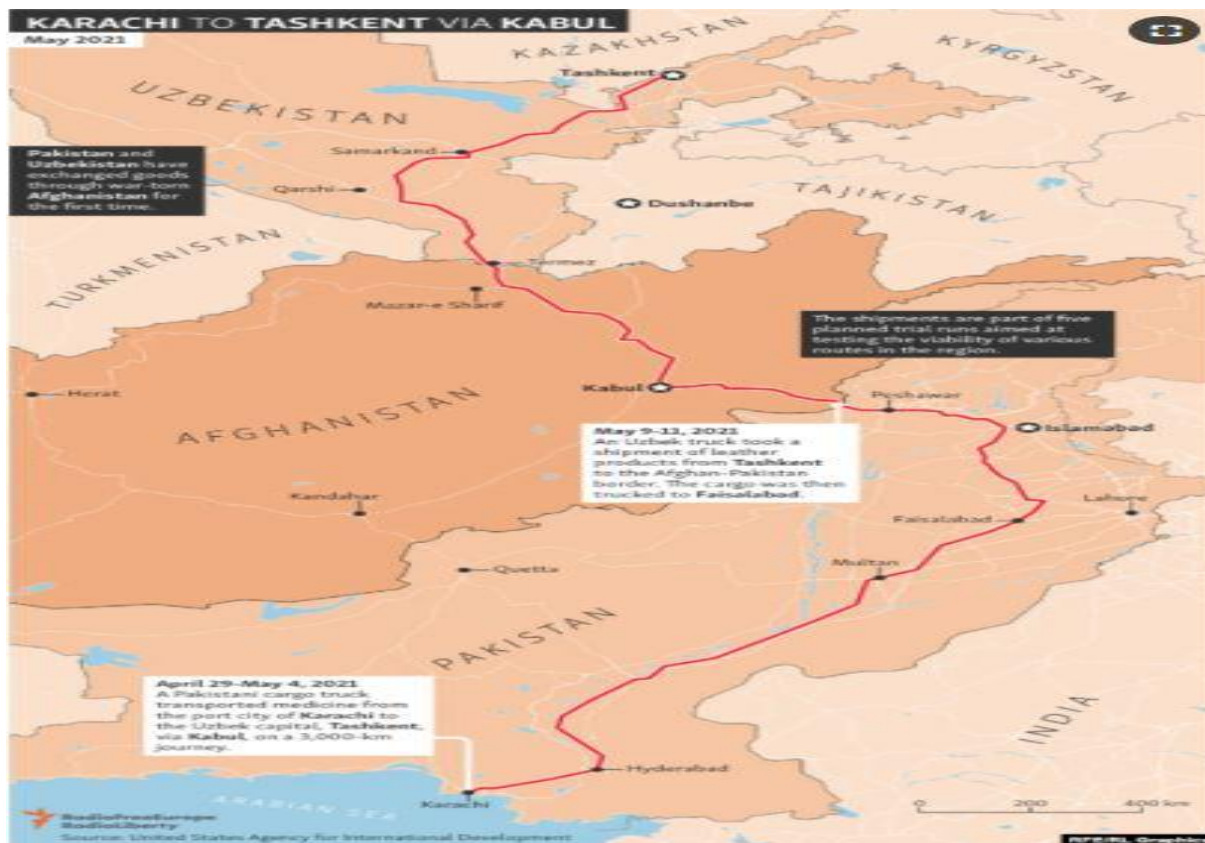
For connectivity, the construction of transportation infrastructures such as road and rail linkages is essential. Pakistan is working on different connectivity projects and options to advance its access to the region. All the shortest roots between the two regions pass through Afghanistan, therefore, Pakistan and CARs have planned many rails and roads projects. Highways and railway lines that connect Pakistani ports with Central Asia are passing through Afghanistan. According to estimates with the advanced communication network trade in the region will rise by 160 percent (Javaid and Rashid, 2016). Good and uninterrupted connectivity via highway will help not just CARs and Pakistan but will also help the rest of

the region and will diversify its commerce and trade relations. Some feasible options for transport routes between Pakistan and Central Asia are the following (Adnan and Fatima, 2015).

1. Route from Salang Pass, Kabul, Jalalabad, Peshawar, Lahore, and Karachi.
2. Route from Tajikistan through Badakhshan, Peshawar, Lahore, and Karachi.
3. From Karakoram highway, Kashgar, Gilgit, Rawalpindi, Lahore, and Karachi.
4. From Chitral, Booni, Baroghal pass to Kankhun, Kurtut, and Khundood and ends at Khorog where it joins Tajikistan's Highway. The Pamir Highway is a portion of the M-41 route that runs from Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) to Termez (Uzbekistan), passing via the territory of Tajikistan.

Recently on February 2, 2021, a very good opportunity regarding inter-regional connectivity has been created by signing an agreement for a 573 km long rail link called the Trans-Afghan Railway project by Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan. In Tashkent, these three countries agreed on the roadmap of building a railway link Connecting Termez (Uzbekistan) Mazar-e-Sharif (Afghanistan) to Peshawar (Pakistan), via Kabul (Figure 1). It is offering a direct rail link between Pakistan and Tashkent and indeed between Pakistan and Central Asia. The plan was signed following trilateral talks by Mr. Razak Dawood, Pakistan's Premier advisor on investment and commerce, Mr. Sardor Umarzakov, the deputy premier and minister of investments of Uzbekistan, and Mr. Hanif Atmar, Afghanistan's foreign minister. It is a five-billion-dollar project. It is a milestone in the respect of regional connectivity truly called an "event of the century" by Tanzila Narbaeva, the Chairman of the Senate of Uzbekistan (Silk Road Briefing, March 05, 2021). This route can reduce travel time from Uzbekistan to Pakistan from 30 to 15 days and save cargo costs by 30-35 percent. It will also significantly decrease transportation time and cost for Pakistan with other CARs as Uzbekistan is situated in the middle of Central Asian Republics. Transporting a container from Tashkent to Karachi cost about 1,400 dollars to 1,600 dollars, while from Tashkent to the Iranian port Bandar Abbas it is 2,600 dollars to 3,000 dollars. This is the shortest way to connect Central Asia to a port. Furthermore, Uzbekistan is the gateway for Russians, the project would improve not just Pakistan's access to Central Asian nations, but also trade would increase by 15-20 percent between Pakistan and Russia (Hashimova, 2021). The decreased travel time is predicted to save member states about 1.7 billion dollars per year, while regional trade via these ports is expected to expand by 80 percent, reaching 6.3 billion dollars (Anwar, 2011). The rail line will run parallel to CASA-1,000. Islamabad's role as a Southern transport channel, offering an outlet for Central Asia is now recognised by most Central Asian nations. As Islamabad has the three most important ports in the Arabian Sea, Pakistan enjoys an advantage over other transit routes.

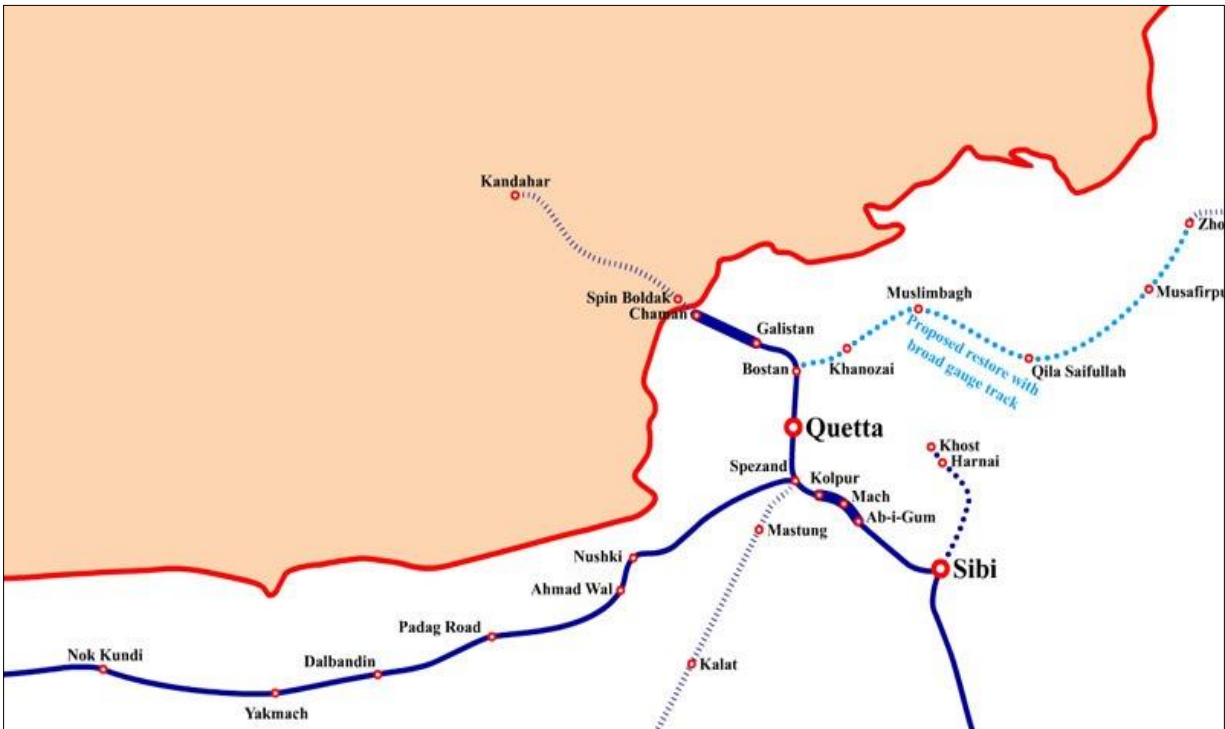
Figure 1: Map Showing Route from Karachi to Tashkent via Afghanistan.



Source: Gandhara, May 26, 2021.

This line will also connect with the 112km Atamyrat (Turkmenistan) and Akina Andkhoy cross-border line which will also link Turkmenistan with Pakistan. This link is already opened on January 14, 2021 (Cuenca, 2021). It has provided an opportunity for Pakistan to strengthen connectivity with Central Asia and will improve trade relations many folds. The implementation of such connectivity and integration projects like the Trans-Afghan railway is very beneficial for Pakistan as well as Central Asian Republics as they also want to get a direct access to Pakistani seaports. The railway line is expected to benefit the economy of the whole region by strengthening both passenger and cargo operations. The line is also expected to contribute to peace and stability in war-torn Afghanistan by producing new employment opportunities for its people. It will help them to keep away from militant groups. Apart from these, in November 2021 Pakistan started work on the Chaman-Spin Boldak rail track to connect the border city Chaman of Pakistan with Kandahar city of Afghanistan (Figure 2). Important to mention that it is a century-old dream that first appeared in 1880, long before the independence of Pakistan.

Figure 2: Map of Chaman-Spin Boldak Rail Track.



Source: Samaa TV, November 5, 2021.

A coastal highway already connects Gwadar and Chaman, and a direct railway line from Gwadar to Chaman is being developed by Pakistan. The Asian Development Bank is helping to build a Chaman-Gwadar railway line which will connect Kandahar, Herat and Kabul cities of Afghanistan too. Travelling to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan will become easy through this route. Another 515 km route is being planned to link Gwadar to Herat in eastern Afghanistan through Panjgur, Kharan, Chaghi, and Rabat. This is providing a direct road connection between Pakistan and Central Asia and will increase manifold trade and economic activities.

Afghanistan is not stable and the instability of the country hampers the connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia. Another option for Pakistan to connect Central Asia is the Wakhan corridor. It is a 16 km narrow strip in Afghanistan separating Tajikistan from Pakistan, situated in the Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan. It is also strategically very important as it is situated at the crossroad between Pakistan, Afghanistan China, and Tajikistan. In the south, it has a 300-kilometre border with Pakistan, in the west and northeast a 260-kilometre boundary with Tajikistan, and a 74-kilometre border with China (Jan, 2013). It is the shortest route to link Pakistan with Central Asia. The route passing through this territory of Afghanistan would be comparatively easier to safeguard than the route passing through the main territory of the country. In the Wakhan region, there are not many security issues, theft, or robbery. The area has also witnessed comparatively relative stability to other parts of Afghanistan. It is a thinly populated region with just 12,000 residents, most of whom are nomads who herd livestock and are cut off from the other main territories of Afghanistan by the Hindukush Mountain ranges (Munir and Shafiq, 2018). The Broghal Pass in the Chitral district of Pakistan is the main entry point into the Wakhan Corridor from the Pakistani side. This Pass is the lowest and easiest in altitude and remains closed due to weather conditions only in the winter. Europeans and Chinese have long utilized the Wakhan Corridor as a commercial route to reach the Indian Ocean via the Arabian Sea Coastlines. It was an important link to the Silk route. As part of the old Silk Road, the corridor is historically significant. Still it has a lot of

potential for regional connections. If a highway is constructed through the Wakhan strip, it will boost regional trade, commerce, and small business, particularly in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.

Keeping in view the importance of this corridor, Pakistan has suggested building a road across it to be connecting the country with Tajikistan. In a high-level meeting at the Foreign Ministry of Pakistan on February 28, 2006, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan agreed to build together a 20-kilo meters long road through Wakhan to assist three-sided trade and other types of businesses (Kazi). The project will cost 90 million dollars. Nespak (National Engineering Services Pakistan) has already finalized the feasibility report. This road will connect Broghal pass to Serhad-i-Lengar in Wakhan, covering a distance of about 95 km, before reaching the Iskeshim in Tajikistan and then it will connect Dushanbe through the Korong-Kalai-Chamb-Kulob. From the Broghal Pass, the distance to Peshawar is only 300 km. Through Wakhan pass the whole route from Dushanbe to Peshawar is reported to be 700 km (Roy, 2006). The route would also link to the Karakoram Highway which is connecting Pakistan and China. It will promote transit trade between CARs and Pakistan, improve inter-regional connectivity, and provide Pakistan access to Central Asian markets once it is operational. Not only it will facilitate Pakistan's trade relationships with CARs, but it will also assist CARs in exporting their commodities to foreign markets through Pakistani ports. There is only one issue the corridor is in high mountains.

The entire regional trade is expected to expand by 160 per cent after the corridors linking the two areas are completed. According to the estimates of Asian Development Bank, the gross domestic product of the participating countries will grow at a rate of 5 percent each year. The corridors need roughly 5 billion dollars in investment for the whole area; therefore, it can be said that these advantages come at a reasonable cost. As an outcome of the new corridors, 139 hours of travel time will be saved (Anwar, 2011). The improvement will benefit the entire region particularly CARs as the poor connectivity coupled with expensive transport by road has resulted in a low exportation pattern in the region. It is the legacy of the USSR-run financial system. It will promote Central Asia's economic and trade diversification, which will benefit the whole region.

At present Pakistani is also doing trade with Central Asian countries through the Chinese route since December 6, 2006. The 2243 km long Almaty-Karachi Road i.e., the Almaty-Bishkek-Kashgar-Islamabad-Karachi link is functional, but it carries a small number of goods. On this route, the first container arrived in Almaty on December 6, 2006. It was a container of "Pak Caspian Trade Link company" headed from Pakistan that contained rice, canned goods, furniture, brass, and marble goods. For the first time it used the route established by the Quadrilateral Transit Trade Agreement between China, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (Business Recorder, December 6, 2006).

Pakistan is also part of the Central Asia Economic Cooperation (CAREC) initiative. It is critical for advancing Pakistan's connectivity with CARs and fulfilling its economic goals in the region. The CAREC takes together eleven states and development collaborators to accelerate development and progress by cooperation, leading to fast economic progress. The core principle of good neighbours, good partners, and good prospects guided the concept. Pakistan joined the CEREC program in 2010 and till 2019 CAREC has invested more than 1.47 billion dollars in transport and trade projects with Pakistan (Akhtar, 2019). Asian Development Bank finances the CAREC Corridor Development Investment Program in Pakistan to contribute to the improvement of regional transportation and energy linkages. The extension of CAREC corridors to Gwadar and Karachi ports, the TAPI gas pipeline, transportation, and trade facilitation, with an emphasis on the development of economic corridors to increase financial opportunities for the residents in the neighbouring regions, are among the ADB's goals (ADB Framework Financing Agreement for CAREC Pakistan).

Another crucially important development in inter-regional connectivity is the ECO transit and transport framework agreement (TTFA). It has provided a detailed plan for creating transportation linkages throughout the region. ECO member countries are linked through the Economic Cooperation Organization trade agreement (ECOTA). The agreement calls for a 15 per cent decrease in tariffs and a

steady increase in the positive list of commodities. Only four nations have approved ECOTA so far, while the other states are refusing to join because they disagree with anti-dumping policies. When all the member countries join it, will be an important contribution to the inter-regional connectivity.

Conclusion

Both the regions are interdependent, which compels them to come closer and work together. Central Asia is offering Pakistan to be a regional trade hub as it is a landlocked region, finding new and cheap energy markets for its energy resources, bilateral trade, cheap raw materials, political prospects as well as support on different international forms among other things. Pakistani ports connecting the region via Afghanistan is the shortest route to connect Central Asia with the international market. This is the shortest way to connect Central Asia to a port. Transporting a container from Tashkent to Karachi cost about 1,400 dollars to 1,600 dollars, while from Tashkent to the Iranian port Bandar Abbas it is 2,600 dollars to 3,000 dollars. It will also decrease travel time. The decreased travel time is predicted to save member states about 1.7 billion dollars per year, while regional trade via these ports is expected to expand by 80 percent, reaching 6.3 billion dollars.

All these prospects will be achieved, and the opportunities will be availed when the two regions are smoothly connected. To take benefit from the potential of each other and get smooth connectivity, they have initiated different projects like the Trans-Afghan Railway line, Chaman-Spin Boldak Rail Track, ECO transit and transport framework agreement (TTFA), QTTA trade route, CASA-1000, TAPI and TAP-500. These are some of the important connectivity initiatives.

Despite huge prospects and importance, the interregional connectivity and engagement of both regions are limited due to the law-and-order situation in Afghanistan. The country is located at the crossroad of both regions; therefore, peace and stability are essential. Keeping in view the importance of peace in Afghanistan for their economic interest, Pakistan and CARs along with other regional countries work together for peace in this strategically important country.

Acknowledgments

None


Conflict of Interest

Authors declared no conflict of interest.


Funding Source

The authors received no funding to conduct this study.

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