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CPEC - Regional Connectivity Between Pakistan and Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a discussion on China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its potential contribution for the augmentation of regional connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asian Republics (CARs). CPEC is the main project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) between China and Pakistan, comprising of industrial zones, pipest lines, energy, rail, and road segments for the trade of goods and energy from western Kashgar and running along the Lenart Highway through western Pakistan to Gwadar in the Arabian Sea. The corridor could link landlocked Central Asian countries to warmer water ports and better connections to South Asia, Middle East, as well as Africa. The study is qualitative and secondary source-based, policy report and official statements-based, and deals with strategic and economic and geopolitical relevance of CPEC. It believes that investment in transport infrastructure, customs harmonization, trade facilitation and development of energy cooperation can boost Pakistan – Central Asia connectivity. But political volatility, security concerns, poor infrastructure, among other regulatory constraints and

regional rivalries are still major hurdles. The paper argues that CPEC has potential of helping to drive already going pan-Eurasian integration by means of continuous investment, institutional transformation and multilateral diplomacy.

Keywords: CPEC, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Regional Connectivity, Central Asian Republics (CARs), Gwadar Port, Economic Integration, Multilateral Diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

In today's international relations, regional connectivity is becoming one of the most prominent issues, as infrastructure corridors are increasingly becoming an important axis of trade traffic, geostrategic partnership relations, economic interdependence and regional development. Energy transmission and digital linkages are now part of connectivity, as are the trade facilitations and customs cooperation as well as industrial integration and access to maritime routes. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is gaining much attention in the world till now and much discussion in the region in this context, as one of the largest connectivity projects in the Asian region. CPEC is a top-class entity of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is set to unite western China with the Gwadar Port in Pakistan via a system of communication and transportation infrastructure such as roads, railways, energy projects, industrial zones and maritime infrastructure. CPEC for Pakistan provides opportunities for modernization of infrastructure, energy security, industrial development and to provide greater geostrategic significance. It has been a chance for CAC nations to switch their trade routes away from the northern and western trade routes to warm water ports and to diversify their trade.

Being in the geographical heartland of South Asia, West Asia, C.A and the Arabian sea, Pakistan enjoys strategic advantages in the region. According to a study, this can make it a potential transit point for regional trade and energy trading for Pakistan. Likewise, the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are endowed with wealth in oil, gas, minerals and hydroelectric power, and are still stuck with limited external transport corridors, due to their landlocked location. This is a confluence of natural conditions as the quest for regional economic integration by Pakistan and diversified access to international markets by Central Asian countries. This paper, therefore, delves into how complementary needs can be met and whether CPEC can turn out to be a viable corridor for Pakistan–Central Asia connectivity, trade growth and regional integration (Bukhari, Kokab and Khan 2024).

Another factor that supports Pakistan's strategic logic of CPEC is the historical history of interaction between Pakistan and China. The history of Pakistan and China's diplomatic relation dates to 1950 and neighbors, they are close strategic partners. In a span of decades, China has been giving support to Pakistan in various sectors like politics, defence, agriculture, trade, infrastructure, economic development, etc. CPEC is one of the most tangible expressions of this bilateral

cooperation, as it heralds a new era where the political, security and military dimensions are underpinned by a new dimension of economic and infrastructural cooperation. The idea of the economic corridor was initially just about reconstruction of the connectivity of the land via road and highway transportation and infrastructure. There had been a shift towards making maritime paths and port facilities more central within China's regional and international connectivity initiatives since then, though. This change further elevated the significance of Gwadar Port and made the relevance of the adjacent areas (including Afghanistan) more pronounced with 91-kilometres of border to China which is one of the main points in any territory extension building linking Pakistan, China and Central Asia (Okochi et al. 2022).

Established in 2013, CPEC is a series of infrastructure, energy, transport and industrial projects that are designed to modernise Pakistan's economy and boost regional connectivity. The cost of the initial estimates of the various projects on CPEC was around \$47 billion and extended up to around \$62 billion by 2020. It focuses on the development of roadways and railways, expansion of Gwadar Port, development of energy projects and creation of Special Economic Zones along with the improvement of Pakistan's logistical capability as key objectives of the package. In November 2013, the opening of the tunnel, official opening of the Gwadar port and arrival of Chinese cargo for further maritime exports to West Asia and to Africa, were important steps towards the practical implementation of the corridor. By the end of 2017, several major energy projects have also been kick-started which makes CPEC partially operational and has proved its ability to avert energy and infrastructure burden on Pakistan (Khan, A, 2022).

CPEC is of much importance to Central Asia because it will provide them a shorter and more diversified route to the world via Pakistan's road networks, and Gwadar Port. The corridor could be used to connect the economies of Central Asia to South Asia, Middle East and the African region, complementing the existing region economic initiatives. It can also help foster cooperation in energy trade, transit, customs harmonization and logistics services, as well as industrial partnerships. However, the accomplishment of such potential requires several conditions such as political stability of Afghanistan, security on CPEC corridors, coordination of the institutions of participating states, completion of infrastructure, and incorporation of Central Asian states' economic priorities in CPEC. Therefore, CPEC should not be regarded as only a bilateral initiative between China and Pakistan, but rather as a broader regional initiative that as well contains an importance dimension for regionally related Pakistan – Central Asia relations and integration for the Eurasia land bridge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current research related to CPEC has mostly focused on the impacts of CPEC on the infrastructure development, energy security, China's strategic plans, and on Pakistan's domestic economic changes. An extensive literature depicts CPEC as a

significant tool for modernising the transport, energy, logistics and industrial sectors of the Pakistani economy. These reports suggest that the investment in the development of roads, modernizing Pakistan's railway network, SEZ, and the development of Gwadar Port is an effective measure to strengthen the economy of the country and play a more effective role as a regional hub for transportation. Meanwhile, areas of concern include debt sustainability and governance capacities, inequitable provincial benefits, security issues and Pakistan's institutional capacity to successfully put in place similar mega huge projects.

At the same time, the literature on Central Asia focuses on its ongoing exploration of alternative transit corridors and onto the world markets. The Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are still geographically landlocked and are reliant on external corridors for international trade. Past research reveals that these countries have tried to strike a balance between options of being connected towards China, Russia, Turkey, European Union, Iran, Afghanistan, and south Asia. Focusing on the potential of CPEC in the region, however, is limited scholarship about how connectivity requirements in Central Asia interact with CPEC. The CASA-1000 and TAPI projects and north-south trade corridors have, however, seen greater interest, but the role that can be played by CPEC regarding Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity has been largely ignored. This buffer indicates the requirement of dedicated research to understand the trade, transit, energy and Gwadar Port (Bukhari) integration between Pakistan and Central Asia via CPEC.

The contribution of CPEC in the transportation modernization of Pakistan is one key theme explored in literature. In the context of CPEC, a wide range of road, highway, rail and logistic corridors is also being envisioned to enhance regional and domestic connectivity. The inefficiency, outmoded infrastructure, and logistical costs of the transport system have been a problem for Pakistan for long. Government estimates suggest the losses to Pakistan due to the transport sector inefficiencies have reached 3.55 percent of the country's annual GDP. In this context, the party regards PEC as a means of technology transfer, development of skills and modernization of Pakistan's transport institutions in addition to its physical infrastructure component. Human resource training and exchange of railway technologies, as well as support via plant, machinery and equipment, provides an example of cooperation within the framework of the railway industry. In short, the developments are likely to enhance the railway sector in Pakistan in the coming future.

The railway part of CPEC is of particular importance for Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity. The long-term plan consists of reconstruction of the existing railway lines once more (Main Line-1 between Karachi and Kotri) and construction of a new railway line from Peshawar to Torkham and projected 1600 km long high-speed rail line between Peshawar and Karachi. Moreover, there are plans in both the short- and long-term stages to engage in the rehabilitation of the existing line ML-2 and the construction of the 1,328km Besima line from Gwadar to Jacobabad and Quetta. The significance of these railway projects is that they might be able to link Gwadar and

Karachi with Pakistan's north and west borders, which would facilitate future linkages with Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and other Central belt republics. “Other major projects with regional implications of CPEC are New Gwadar International Airport (NGFIA)”. The airport, built at around \$230 million with Chinese grant assistance, was inaugurated in 2019, right after it was constructed which was just 26 kilometers east of Gwadar city in Gurandani, Balochistan. The completion of its project would enable Gwadar to become an important logistics/transit and trade hub for regional connectivity (Ko, Leung and Ridwan 2026).

Another significant line of research outlines the implications of CPEC's transformative impact and its need for comparison with other grand-scale externally financed war reconstruction and development initiatives, such as the Marshall Plan. Experts believe that CPEC can revitalize Pakistan's economy by transforming its regional and national infrastructures, integrating the region and boosting industrial growth. CPEC, like the Marshall Plan, which would help rebuild Europe after the war, is called the catalyst for long-term development, connectivity and productive capacity. According to the estimates available, up to 2.3 million jobs can be created in Pakistan and the economic growth of the country would increase by 2-2.5 percent per year due to CPEC. The State has also committed approximately \$11 billion in loan guarantees and grant financing for modernizing the transport system (subsidized and concession loans). While these estimates reflect the potential of externally financed infrastructure projects for regional transformation, they are tightly dependent upon the governance framework, capacity to implement infrastructure projects, and geopolitical context (Rasool, G., Mangi, S. N., Ahmed, A., and Charan, F, 2024).

The energy component of CPEC has also been given extensive focus. The nation's power crisis has been a major restraint on industrial development, productivity and Pakistan's economic competitiveness throughout the history of the country. Studies on CPEC's “Early Harvest” projects indicate that energy-related investments have been at the core of the corridor's short-term economic impact. A total of over \$33 billion has been invested in energy infrastructure in Pakistan through private consortia to combat the recurring shortage of electricity which has on many occasions been over 4,500 MW and resulted in a loss of GDP growth of around 2 to 2.5 percent. It is reported that over the past four years, close to 10,400 MW of energy generating capacity has been installed at the back of CPEC. The developments are influential for the region for connectivity because energy is a key prerequisite for industrial zones and logistic network, export processing and transit infrastructure. For central Asia, energy integration through CPEC can also pave the way for energy exporting industry that facilitates the electricity trade and pipeline connectivity to regional energy integration projects like CASA-1000 project and TAPI project (Younus, 2016).

Meanwhile, there are mixed views on the financial and developmental impact on the CPEC. Based on some studies, the CPEC investment will provide Pakistan with better GDP growth, ease its infrastructure constraints and generate more revenue through transport charges, tolls and transit fees. Future long-term bridge and road

tolls are estimated to be between \$6 billion and \$8 billion a year. According to other studies, the credit facility provided by CPEC is equivalent to approximately 6% of Pakistan's GDP, therefore, the burden of debt should be viewed within the context of enhanced development, due to the beneficial impacts of increased infrastructure and energy availability. In this light, CPEC investment is expected to augment Pakistan's annual GDP growth rate and offset some of the previous limitations on the economic growth, that are attributed to the infrastructure. Yet literature also emphasizes that these benefits are not guaranteed, and require clear and effective financial management, sufficient revenue generation, stable policy processes and the successful coordination of CPEC routes with regional trade corridors (McCartney, M, 2022). The geopolitical literature situates CPEC in the context of Pakistan-China relationship and the Belt and Road Initiative of the Chinese government. It was Pakistan's historical cooperation with China that has had a profound impact on domestic politics, foreign policy and strategic thinking in Pakistan. CPEC is the greatest economic manifestation of this relationship, including energy projects, transportation infrastructure, industrial infrastructure, port infrastructure and modernization of infrastructure. The relevance of the CPEC comes amid speculations that it will act as a “gamechanger” for Pakistan as it can stimulate the economy and give fresh impetus to the country's role in the region's trade. But other researchers doubt that CPEC's benefits will reach all equally and are skeptical about the ability of Pakistan's institutional system to translate investment into inclusive development. It is also interesting to note in the literature that the role of Afghanistan is essential to advance CPEC towards Central Asia. The stability and involvement of Afghanistan is key to any viable land route between CPEC and Central Asia (Central Asian Republics), since its geopolitical location is shared with China, and it is sandwiched between Pakistan and Central Asian countries. Afghanistan borders China, is between Pakistan and Central Asia (Central Asian Republics) and its stability and engagement will be vital to any successful land-based link between CPEC and Central Asia.

Another discussion is related to the route politics of CPEC at the domestic level, and its consequences for regional integration. In general, three segments are identified in CPEC for studies: trade, investment and regional connectivity. Afghanistan-China and Pakistan-China aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are also covered in this context. Uncertainties have been raised by some scholars due to the planning of routes under CPEC, which they believe has resulted in a perception of unfair treatment for smaller provinces in Pakistan. These have resulted in discussions regarding the regional imbalance, provincial equity and allocation of infrastructure projects. These domestic political concerns have direct relevance regarding Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity as these western and northwestern leg of CPEC run through the region, which are geographically close to Central Asia and Afghanistan. Thus, the development of transportation links in the form of railways and roads to Balochistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan and towards the province of KP might be of significance in opening and bringing CPEC to include a larger regional corridor (Chen & Li, 2021).

In general, there are considerable number of studies on the CPEC, much attention in literature has been given to the economic and geopolitical perspective of improving relations between Pakistan and China; the significance of CPEC in bridge making Pakistan-Central Asia remains under-researched and is poorly developed. In this connection, existing research is valuable in addressing the issues of infrastructure modernisation, energy security, the Gwadar Port, domestic politics, and a regionally oriented strategy for China. Fewer studies, however, look at how these factors unfold in Central Asia's geography as a landlocked region with the need for a diversified trade route and the interest in Warm-Water Ports. This research, thus, tackles that void by examining CPEC not just from the perspective as a bilateral corridor between China and Pakistan but also as possibly a regional connectivity hub for Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and the Central Asian republics. Therefore, its core is its potential role in furthering cooperation between these sections to foster Pakistan–Central Asia trade, transit, energy, and overall regional integration.

METHODOLOGY

The type of methodology followed in this research is qualitative research with document analysis. The sources are academic journals, books, government publications, reports and assessments by international financial institutions. It is being analyzed based on comparative analysis of the interests of Pakistan and all the Central Asian States. The focus is towards an explanatory and policy route.

Results and Findings

The newly established China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project is now an integral part of the economic and connectivity link as it has provided the seaports of China with easy access to the international markets and Afghan countries' (Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs)) countries. The development of Gwadar Port, the expansion of the road networks and rolling out of regional transportation systems have enhanced the trade connectivity and strengthened Pakistan's role as a regional trade hub. Since the inception of CPEC in 2016, trade between the two nations has seen a considerable surge from US\$19.49 million to US\$428.85 million in 2024. The number of goods exports was 17.96 million in 2003 and 402.6 million in 2024, while goods imports were also rapidly growing, particularly since 2022, to 26.25 million in 2024. The landmark milestone in trade underscores the importance of the CPEC infrastructure and connectivity in bolstering Pakistan's economic relationship with the Central Asian nations, the economic integration of the region and improving market access (Khan, M. B, 2024).

DISCUSSIONS

Central Asian countries and Regional Connectivity

Overview of CPEC - Phase I

Pakistan's ill infrastructure and energy scarcity crisis was first tackled by creating an "early harvest" phase of China-Pak Economic Corridor. To ensure strong physical infrastructure for connection, the country's southern ports (Gwadar Port and

Karachi Port) were linked to the Khunjerab Pass, in the north, during this period. Progress on a major energy production scale was the central concern of this phase, as it was a common issue which had been addressed. Besides the hydroelectric, wind and solar plants, there were coal-based power plants. In 2020, Pakistan's CPEC energy projects installed over 6,000-8,000MW of power on the national grid, which significantly reduced the instances of load shedding and increased electricity availability in industrial production (Ismail, M., 2025). Major infrastructure projects were also constructed at the same time, such as the Karakoram Highway, the planned modernisation of the Main Line-1 (ML-1) railway, and the road infrastructure, including the Karachi – Lahore corridor. To enhance digital connectivity, Gwadar Port & its Free Zone were also established, and an international cross-border fibre optic cable was also laid between China & Pakistan. Largely, Phase I created a continuous north-south economic corridor that linked the Arabian Sea with western China. The main goal for these projects was the stabilisation of the home country, but it also helped position Pakistan as a regional transit hub. Of particular interest, the city of Gwadar began to emerge as a trade port that links Central Asia with the sea, creating opportunities for landlocked countries to access the sea, and introducing the possibility for regional integration (Rauf, A., Ghani, A., & Shah, S. A. H., 2021).

Phase II on CPEC

The second phase of CPEC, commonly known as "CPEC 2.0," is mainly dedicated to industrial development, economic diversification, and regional connectivity, following the first phase of infrastructure development. The focus of this stage is 'soft connections' (for example, trade facilitation, policy coordination and technical cooperation) rather than physical infrastructure. The creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) such as Rashakai Special Economic Zone, Allama Iqbal Industrial City, Dhabeji Special Economic Zone and Bostan Special Economic Zone are key elements of this phase. In these zones, increases in jobs, export industries, and foreign investment will be expected. In this phase, infrastructure is still being expanded, especially with the proposed ML-1 railway project, which is anticipated to greatly increase freight capacity and shorten travel times throughout Pakistan. Besides this, with the addition of the Gwadar International Airport in 2024 and other new port expansions, Gwadar's operational status towards regional logistics hub has got another boost (Faisal, M., Faiz, M.A., & Latif, M.I., 2025). Recent legislative directives suggest a strategic shift towards sectors such as the mining industry, electric vehicles, renewable energy and modern agriculture. In the year 2025, the focus of Pakistan-China partnership is shifting towards sustainable development, particularly in the areas of digital infrastructure, green development, and industrial cooperation, aligning with international developments. In 2025, the scope of cooperation between Pakistan and China is narrowing down to areas of digital infrastructure, green development, and industrial cooperation, which bear emphasis on global sustainable development trends. Significantly, Phase II aims to further integrate Pakistan into regional and international value chains. The aim of envisaged connectivity projects across multiple countries is to create an integrated Eurasian commerce and logistics

network in which the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is also to become one of the world's greatest infrastructures. Such projects include rail and road connections to Afghanistan and Central Asia (such as Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif and Termez). This still evolving architecture can be accessed by the Central Asian countries as investment partners, transit economies, and trading partners (Prince, S. R., 2025).

Significance of Pakistan as a Regional Transitorial Hub

Importance of Pakistan as regional transitorial hub. Under this developing connectivity plan, Pakistan is slowly emerging as region's transit hub, linking China, the Gulf, Central Asia and West Asia. Islamabad's "Vision Central Asia" policy clearly links trade, transportation and energy linkages with the effective connectivity of its territory between Central Asia and the Arabian Sea and has already been officially confirmed as such. This objective is complemented by the north-south road network of CPEC, the planned reopening of the Karachi/ Peshawar railway corridor and Pakistan's integration into regional transit arrangements, such as the QUTA (Quadrilateral Transit in Transit Agreement) that links Pakistan's key ports with China's Xinjiang region and then on to central Asian markets. Some other initiatives, such as talks on the Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan – India gas pipeline and electricity projects like CASA-1000 also underscore Pakistan's status as a corridor state for energy and trade, albeit with the continued risk of security and political instability in Afghanistan limiting actual implementation (A. U. Rehman, A. Hakim, K. Khan, and I. U. Khan, 2018). In the light of recent diplomatic relations, the transit-service arm of the CPEC is aiming at transforming itself into an agreement-based organization where specific Central Asian states entercontact. Besides allowing Pakistan complete access to its three seaports Karachi, Port Qasim and Gwadar, Pakistan is also advanced stage talks with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan on port-access and transit trade agreements which would enable Kazakhstan and Central Asian products to pass through Pakistani territory and reach the Indian Ocean. In 2024 and 2025, policy documents coming from Pakistani think tanks are increasingly portraying the situation of Pakistan becoming a part of a complicated transpass and transshipment game through ensuring reciprocal sea access for Central Asian republics (CARs) via Gwadar and Karachi and giving land access to Central Asian and Russian markets. In this regard, role of Pakistan as transit hub is not just theoretical but is being gradually institutionalised through practical steps like bilateral agreements, regional platforms such as the SCO and the physical integration of CPEC with other Eurasian transport initiatives (Javaid, F., & Saddiqui, M. N, 2025).

CPEC is a Strategic Trade Connectivity Corridor

As the primary strategic trade route, through which Central Asian nations may find a new gateway to the Indian Ocean, CPEC is the redheaded stepchild of the requirement to end landlocked statuses. CPEC is the main strategic trade route and offers Central Asian states an alternative route to the Indian Ocean, complementing if not replacing traditional trading routes through Russia and Iran. Xinjiang in China is primarily linked to the arteries of the Arabian Sea ports of Pakistan (Gwadar and

Karachi) through length of 3,000 kms of roads, railway, pipelines and digital infrastructure. When Gwadar deep-sea hub is fully integrated with other ports and logistics centres in the global trade and the Gwadar International Airport becomes a hub for China-Pakistan trade, then there is potential to have some cargo transported through the trans-Afghan route via CPEC from Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan and finally further via Pakistan. It provides Central Asia traders with more alternative sea transport routes and reduces sea distance. In fact, according to the assessment of Pakistani and other foreign experts' bodies, CPEC can provide Central Asia with a concrete "southern corridor" to facilitate its trade when added to the QTTA, in this context it should be noted that the Chinese-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway runs in parallel with the northern corridors and might also be extended towards Charqo, located in southern corridors that will connect with Central Asia via Iran's Bandar Abbas or Chabahar ports (Ismail, M., Hassan, T. U, Haq, A. U, Mir, W, 2023). In fact, already talks about contracts, as well as model agreements, serve as proof of the strategic significance of this mega project. While Kazakh grain, oil and metals may be traded via Gwadar and Karachi to the south, Pak is working towards better arrangements with Kazakhstan as part of joint ventures and envisages Turkmenistan as the first Central Asian nation to have formalised access to Gwadar under a planned Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Different international development organisations are investing in Pakistan's seaports and CPEC corridors as a feasible alternative to increase Central Asia's trade connectivity to reduce the exceptionally high trade costs; specifically, Pakistani see Gwadar and Karachi as "reciprocal" seaports for the trade movement to Central Asian states during policy briefings. But for CPEC to be the preferred route to the south for the Central Asian trade, this project will have to demonstrate reliability, safety and competitiveness in comparison to other projects such as International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) through Iran or a renewed interest for the Chabahar route. In general, however, the overall strategic logic is clear; CPEC can transform Eurasian trade routes, making central Asian economies more 'a land-linked' or 'land-bridged' than currently is the case, as they link with direct access to Gwadar and Karachi to the Indian Ocean via corridors being built by Pakistan and China (Gill, A. T., Zaman, U. A. & Ismail, M, 2023).

CCS's Doctoral Study

On the role of CPEC for Landlocked Central Asian States is a country specific analysis. Having geographical limitations that prevented the free movement of people and products, Central Asia has traditionally had inadequate connections with global markets. Therefore, it was necessary to establish new geographic relations in Central Asian Republics (CARs), as it would provide them with some reasonable trade options, which would provide additional commercial activity. With the importance of greater geographical connectivity in Central Asia, the neighbouring states have been called upon to open or upgrade the roads. In this regard, China is trying to set up infrastructure facilities to facilitate the connectivity within the CARs. Due to its location, however, the area failed to enjoy the benefits to the fullest. To keep the

economy's stagnation at bay and to promote stability in the regions, China is calling for economic corridors in Asia. The ongoing geopolitical connectivity schemes will further enable the transfer of goods through different corridors of Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as well as enable their markets to connect with major trading centres in Europe. Due to the implementation of the new infrastructure, several social, economic, political and security challenges are emerging (Kalyuzhnova, Y. & Holzhacker, H., 2021).

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is one of the key Central Asian states, which appears to be poised to move forward with joint initiatives within the framework of CPEC. While the launch of CPEC appears to have an especially bright future prospective for financial boom to the participating states, for China and Central Asian states, the issue of local security remains a major concern. Worsening situation in Afghanistan is the main problem for expansion of multilateral family members between China, Pakistan and Central Asia (Panibratov, A., Kalinin, A., Rysakova, L., & Lazariva, A., 2025). The China-Kazakhstan border gateway Khorgos is a good example of cooperative cooperation—it is a large dry port helping to facilitate the trade of the East Asia-EU Corridor. China gets access to energy-rich markets in Central Asia through Kazakhstan and is able to diversify its access to Western markets by complementing the sea, bypassing maritime chokepoints. Kazakhstan's importance in accomplishing the economic and geopolitical goals of CPEC and BRI is highlighted by the Western Europe - Western China Highway and plans to connect with Gwadar Port via future road and rail links. Further, the nation's participation in the BRI further cements itself into the country's status as an important transit hub (Dave. B, 2021).

Uzbekistan

An important landlocked Central Asian state, Uzbekistan has been building up its regional connectivity and economic integration with China, especially doing so within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), specifically through CPEC. In this sense, Uzbekistan has also expressed great interest in acquiring access to Pakistani seaports, including Gwadar and Karachi, to overcome its geographical limitations, and to move away from the northern routes in trade. However, in recent years, China has developed its trade and export with Uzbekistan to exceed \$10 billion and has expanded its co-operation in areas of digital connectivity, energy and transportation, making Uzbekistan an important ally in the process of attaining the regional integration goals of CPEC (Tekir, G., 2026). China finds itself having one of Uzbekistan's most diverse economies, making it an ideal economic partner. Chinese firms have been investing in Uzbekistan since 1991 at an approximate of \$8 billion. China contributed \$285 million to kick off and implement more than 40 initiatives in the fields of labour, education, agriculture, water resources, and fitness care. (Popov, V., 2023). According to Uzbek National news agency, a lot of big financial programs are being developed. One of them is an "over-tech park" which was incorporated into Jizakh's Special Economic Area in 2013. In the field of concerted transport and logistics operations, Uzbekistan is playing an important role for BRI (KATpenova, A.

3., 2024).

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan has grown to be a key player in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly given its significance for the China - Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the region that will further enhance connectivity. Turkmenistan is the home of one of the world's largest deposits of natural gas, and has emerged, in part, as an important energy supplier to China. The best example is the "Central Asia - China Gas Pipeline" that begins in Turkmenistan, passes through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and ends in the province of Xinjiang in China. With its aim of securing a diverse range of energy supplies via different supply lines, Beijing has been stepping up investments in Turkmenistan's energy sector. For its part, Turkmenistan believes that it can leverage its relationship with China and the potential of connecting to the seaports via Pakistan's Gwadar Port (CPEC) with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to overcome its geographical isolation, to open up additional export markets outside the traditional routes of Iran and Russia, and to gain access to seaports via Pakistan. A, 2025).

Tajikistan

China is doing well as Tajikistan's leading economic partner. The two nations' bilateral commerce increased significantly from US\$885 million in 2016 to almost US\$3.9 billion in 2024. Its development becomes a reflection of the increasing economic interdependency within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). With over 90% of Tajikistan's imports coming from China, the trade balance is still significantly skewed in China's favour, perpetuating a trend of asymmetric economic ties (Aminjonov, R., & Kholmatov, M, 2022). Tajikistan has considerable investment portfolio in China. Since 2007, more than 700 Chinese-owned businesses have been established with a combined investment of more than US\$4 billion in China. Previously, China had pumped US\$238 million in FDI, making up 81.2% of Tajikistan's foreign investment total in 2015. It's likely this has increased now with current trends. Tajikistan also hopes to gain access to Gwadar, which can act as a hub for the rest of the world and Central Asia. President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan wants Pakistan to be able to use the Gorno - Badakhshan Autonomous Province to access various international destinations to Central Asian countries, he said during his visit to Islamabad. This will involve the construction of a new dual highway with the steep mountain terrain of Tajikistan (Vakulchuk, R., & Overland, I, 2018).

Kyrgyzstan

The cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been strengthened significantly between China and Kyrgyzstan, as both nations have extended their alliance till 2026. This partnership is in line with Kyrgyzstan's national development strategy, which places a strong emphasis on the energy, digital economy, infrastructure, and artificial intelligence sectors (Nadin, R., Mami, E., Calabrese, L., Cao, Y., & Chen, Y, 2024). One of the major initiatives on the agenda of this cooperation is the China - Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan railway project, which aims to enhance the region's trade and connectivity. To facilitate "logistics" for people and

products, Chinese President Xi Jinping has stressed the importance of this railway and advocated for its high-quality construction and upgrading of existing ports. The two countries are expanding their cooperation in areas such as artificial intelligence, big data and international ecommerce, apart from infrastructure. China has guaranteed business companies will be more active in investment in Kyrgyzstan and buy more quality agricultural products from the country. Cultural and educational exchanges are also encouraged as Bilateral cooperation programmes are established such as the Chinese Cultural Centre and Luban Workshop in Kyrgyzstan, etc. (Khitakhunov, A, 2024).

The spatial integration works currently ongoing in the Central Asian region and in Pakistan are supposed to help enhancing the transport and trade capacities, thereby creating incentives for regional trade and enhancing economic activities. Several social, political and economic issues have arisen since the inception of these tasks. In Pakistan and Central Asia, security and political participation have grown to be complementary to facilitate economic activity. Before the BRI began, some of the components for the energy infrastructure projects and the connection routes were laid out. Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has guaranteed high connectivity routes for Pakistan and its new markets to take advantage of international trade. In such a way, China fulfills its demand in Afghanistan to allow its neighbours to connect either to territories or markets (Ishraf Jalali Omarkhail, I., & Zahid, A., 2025). Given that the completion of the CPEC and related projects is soon, the infrastructure development in Central Asia is progressing in line with the advancement of the project. Political leadership of Pakistan and CARs largely assumes that with the development of transport this communitization will stimulate the growth of their economies and eliminate barriers of trade and movement. With the objective of regional integration in Pakistan and Central Asia looming, more and more times political elites are considering bypassing Afghanistan. Until now, political stability in Afghanistan was a condition to put in place for regional connectivity in Pakistan and the Central Asian States. (Raza, S. H, 2024).

CONCLUSION

CPEC can turn into a game-changing regional connectivity project to connect Pakistan's Arabian Sea port cities with the landlocked Central Asian states. CPEC can give the C.A. states a diversified entry to warm water ports and international markets via transport integration, including the construction of new roads, rail lines, energy corridors and trade facilitation mechanisms through the port of Gwadar. The connectivity could make Pakistan a better hub of the South Asian-Euro-Mide-Africa regional connectivity. But without putting in place policy frameworks to support infrastructure, CPEC cannot become a pan-CASEC connectivity tool for Pakistan. These are also key requirements, like political stability, regional diplomacy, institutional efficiency, security cooperation and economically viable logistical capabilities. Pakistan should also investigate encouraging transit arrangements, customs compatibility, border management and cooperate with Afghanistan and

Central Asian Republics. These conditions must be effectively tackled to transform CPEC into a platform for regional integration, economic interdependence, and shared prosperity of the region in the wake of Eurasia integration.

Recommendations

According to AIYK and AIOAB, policy recommendations for strengthening CPEC-based Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity are as follows:

To Expedite the Completion of the Infrastructure of CPEC for Regional Connectivity

Remaining CPEC infrastructure projects should be expedited further for Pakistan to enhance trade and transit ties with Central Asian Republics. A high priority should be given to modern highways, railway lines, dry ports, logistics handling facilities, and energy corridors to link the Isthmian (Pakistan) ports with Afghanistan and further with the markets of Central Asia. These projects will not only help in cutting transportation costs but also create a more efficient trade system and make Pakistan's position as a hub of regional connectivity more prominent between South Asia and Central Asia with faster completion time.

Make Gwadar Port a Gateway for Central Asia

Gwadar Port is a hub to be established as central maritime gateway for landlocked Central Asian states. Pakistan needs to increase the expansion of road and rail connectivity roads from Gwadar to Torkham and Chaman, Quetta and other borderlands where it encounters the Afghanistan and Central Asian route. CPEC opens an opportunity for Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) to access warm-water ports and global sea markets through its link with Gwadar and trade routes.

Improve Pakistan-Central Asia Traffic and Movement Routes

Pakistan needs to engage in bilateral and multilateral discussions with central Asian nations regarding trade facilitation, customs harmonisation, right to transit and logistics cooperation with them. These pacts can minimize bureaucratic hurdles, ease trade movement across borders, and encourage regular trade on the CPEC corridors. Improve institutional interaction between countries will help make Pakistan a reliable trade and transit partner of Central countries.

Connect CPEC with Trans-Afghan Connectivity Projects

For this reason, if the Pakistan China Economic Cooperation is not integrated with the Afghanistan and trans-Afghan trade corridors, the regional significance of this would be diminished significantly. It is highly recommended that Pakistan backs up vital infrastructure and diplomatic efforts that connect CPEC with Chahbahar route through Afghanistan to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. However, linking CPEC to trans-Afghan railway and road corridors can help improve CPEC from 'Pakistan-China road connectivity corridor' to becoming a larger 'Pakistan-Central Asia road and rail connectivity framework'.

Enhancing security along CPEC and Regional Transit Routes

Successful regional connectivity is impossible without security. In elaborating any measure, Pakistan needs to have border management, sharing of databanks, coordination on counterterrorism operation and protection of transport

infrastructure at CPEC and adjacent and related transit routes. A secure corridor will not only allow foreign investment to flow but safeguard the safe transport of commercial goods and allow for seamless movement of goods within and between Central Asia and Pakistan.

Reduce Customs, visa and Border Formalities

Catering to travel restrictions in the countries of the region, their customs, visa, and transit arrangements should be eased to enhance trade, investment and people-to-people contact. Digital customs platforms, one-window trade facilities, electronic documentation and harmonized customs procedures can help tackle delays and enhance the overall efficiency of the trade supply chains. These reforms are needed so that CPEC may no longer be just an infrastructure project and become a viable trade corridor.

Increasing Cooperation in Energy with the Middle East Countries of Central Asia

Energy cooperation should be an important pillar of Pakistan-Central Asia energy connectivity via CPEC. Central Asia has a rich natural gas, oil and hydroelectric resources and Pakistan is always having energy demand. Pakistan needs to capitalize on bilateral partnership and widen cooperation in terms of regional energy projects, electricity transmission, gas pipelines, and energy trade. Integrating CASA-1000 with TAPI can enhance Pakistan energy security and accelerate economic integration with Central Asia (CA).

Encourage PSP in Regional Logistics

Private sector should be encouraged for investments in logistics, transport services, warehouses, freight forwarding, industrial zones and export-oriented businesses along CPEC routes. PPPs can enhance countries' operation efficiencies, generate jobs and strengthen countries' commercial network in Central Asia. Private sector funding is particularly crucial for the development of CPEC's infrastructure into usable trade and industrial applications.

Improve the Ability of Academic and Policymaker Circles to Collaborate on Research

Cooperation and coordination among universities, think tanks, and policy research institutes in Pakistan and Central Asia in the field of research in terms of trade integration, regional connectivity, economic diplomacy, logistics and corridor governance should be encouraged. The cooperation can create policy solutions to the political, economic and logistic issues of Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity based on CPEC and generate supportive evidence.

Ensure Sustainable and Green Connectivity

Going forward, the CPEC previously planned transport and connectivity infrastructure should relate to environment-friendly features such as renewable energy, green infrastructures, climate-robust transport infrastructure, and environmentally responsible industrial planning. The viability of the CPEC and acceptance of connectivity with international and regional partners will become easier due to sustainable development.

Enhance role of ECO and SCO

The use of regional institutions like Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO)

and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) must be maximised for promoting regional connectivity in the frame of CPEC. These can be vehicles to support infrastructure coordination, policy dialogue, dispute resolution, trade cooperation, and security coordination within the region. Their engagement can pave the way for CPEC to be utilized as multi-lateral forum for economic integration between Pakistan-CA.

Make CPEC Aligned with the Economic Goals of Central Asian Nations

The region-specific economic considerations for Central Asian countries should be considered, and Pakistan should pursue them through CPEC's regional outreach such as access to seaports, energy exports, agriculture exports, mineral exports, logistics diversification and industrial cooperation among regionally developing countries. A demand-driven approach will make CPEC more attractive to Central Asian republics and enhance the potential of its success for regional connectivity mechanism.

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