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## **The Evolving Regional Geopolitics: Connectivity Between Pakistan & Central Asia**

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### **Abstract:**

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 presents both opportunities and challenges to the regional states in terms of regional peace, stability, connectivity and economic integration. This study explores the historical context and evolving regional geopolitics which has concerns but still has opportunities to enhance connectivity projects between Pakistan and Central Asia by involving the economic interests of China. The study uses the lens of complex interdependence theory to analyse the data, acknowledging numerous channels through which states are interconnected. Furthermore, the study underscores the pivotal role of Afghanistan's stability in defining the scope of economic activities between the two regions. It examines the critical importance of peace and stability in Afghanistan for promoting economic cooperation and the challenges posed by the legitimacy of the new Taliban government. The analysis further delves into the implications of these dynamics for Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs), highlighting the opportunities and obstacles for deeper regional collaboration.

**Key Words:** Pakistan, Central Asia, BRI, CPEC, geopolitics, regional connectivity, collaboration, economic cooperation, regional integration

### **INTRODUCTION**

Pakistan's connectivity with the Central Asian Republics (CARs) is important, particularly in economic collaboration and regional integration. With the US leaving Afghanistan, Pakistan has new opportunities and challenges to strengthen its relationships with the CARs and take advantage of the region's economic potential. This paper explores the various dimensions of these relations and shed light on the implications that lie ahead. CARs with their abundant oil and gas reserves, present attractive prospects for economic partnerships and trade relations. Pakistan can act as a doorway for CARs to enter global markets due to its advantageous location and potential as a transit route.

The connectivity between Pakistan and the CARs is complicated due to the political aspect of Afghanistan. The stability and coherence of regional projects are impacted by Afghanistan's internal political dynamics, ethnic differences, and governance issues (Khan, 2014). Developing and carrying out cogent economic policies and participating in significant regional cooperation

frameworks in Afghanistan is challenging due to the absence of a cohesive and inclusive government.

The socioeconomic makeup of Afghanistan creates barriers for Pakistan and the CARs to collaborate economically. Significant development issues confront the nation, including unemployment, poor infrastructure, and insufficient institutional capacity. In addition to limiting Afghanistan's potential as a commercial and transit hub, these socioeconomic limitations necessitate significant financial and other support for its development and rehabilitation. The chances for economic integration and collaboration are harmed by Afghanistan's lack of economic stability and prosperity, which affects the regional economy as a whole (Anwar, 2011). As former President of Pakistan Arif Alvi once said that it is shorter to fly from Tajikistan to Islamabad than to fly from Islamabad to Karachi (Suberker, 2021). However, there is less communication between Pakistan and Tajikistan just because of the instability in Afghanistan.

This research examines the economic interests of Pakistan and the Central Asian Republic, governmental measures to advance those interests, and the consequences of the vacuum left by the US disengagement from the region. The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on the strategies, challenges, and opportunities surrounding regional integration and economic cooperation between Pakistan and CARs by examining these areas. We can also see the mutual interest of other regional powers like China with Pakistan in Central Asia. A paper draws the possibility available to CARs for utilizing the economic benefits of regional connectivity between Kashgar and Gwadar via the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Javaid & Rashid, 2016).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The exist multidimensional literature and research related to the topic. A number of studies analyzed Pakistan's connectivity with the Central Asian Republics, concentrating on the possibilities and difficulties for economic collaboration and regional integration. Saleem Khan, Sher Ali and Saima Urooje (2019) explored the trade patterns between Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) between 1995 and 2017. They found Pakistan had been an important trading partner for the CARs, with a higher export intensity than import intensity. This suggests that, compared to the CARs, Pakistan benefited from a high degree of commerce and has developed industry-specific expertise. The study emphasized Pakistan's ability to use its resources more effectively, diversify its exports, and improve economic relations with the CARs by signing free trade agreements.

Adam Saud (2018) explored the historical significance of the Silk Routes in connecting Turkestan (Central Asia) and Hindustan (South Asia). Despite the dissolution of the previous Soviet Union and the subsequent creation of autonomous Central Asian governments, Pakistan's engagement with these states has been hindered by various domestic, regional, and international political challenges. The introduction of projects like the One Belt One Road (OBOR) now renamed as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the CPEC has presented Pakistan with a significant opportunity to strengthen its position in South Asia-Central Asia connectivity.

Umbreen Javaid and Azhar Rashid (2016) surveyed China's involvement in Central Asia and what they mean for Pakistan. It examined the strategic depth of China's relations with Central Asia in the context of the changing regional and global political environment. It also examined Pakistan's relations with Central Asia and offers possible ways for CARs to benefit economically from

connectivity in the region, particularly through the CPEC, which runs from Kashgar to Gwadar. The paper gave suggestions for CARs to take advantage of the regional connection made possible by CPEC and contributes to understanding the potential and challenges offered by China's growing influence.

Yousif and Kakar (2022) examined the implications of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban regime's comeback for regional stability. It emphasized the risk that Afghanistan, which is already dealing with decades of conflict, would face additional upheaval and humanitarian difficulties following the US leave. The abrupt withdrawal of the US has created a political vacuum in the region, resulting in the dissolution of the state structure and generating concerns about the chances for peace.

Kayhan Barzegar (2014) evaluated Iran's dual strategy in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001. Iran's "Look to the East" grand plan, which emphasises greater energy and economic ties with eastern nations in Asia, including India, China, and Japan, is aligned with the first element of policy, which is to maintain stability and support the Afghan central government. The second factor is Iran's aversion to foreign troops stationed in Afghanistan, especially American troops. Iran views foreign powers as a cover for the growth of radicalism and the weakening of its interests in national security. It is good for Iran that the USA is now withdrawing but the question here is whether the new regime in Afghanistan is legitimate or not.

Shabir Ahmad Khan (2022) in his article "Trans-Regional Connectivity in Eurasia's Heartland and the Role of Uzbekistan" discussed Uzbekistan's strategic position among vital transportation arteries linking the Eurasian heartland in all directions, as well as its participation in regional connectivity initiatives. Pakistan's "Vision Central Asia Policy" and the proposed Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia Corridor, aimed at complementing the CPEC, reflect the evolving regional geopolitical and geo-economic landscape. The paper contends that shifting regional and global dynamics establish an ideal environment for improved connectivity between Central and South Asia via Afghanistan, with Pakistan and Uzbekistan ready to play crucial roles due to their major geographical positions within their respective areas amidst shifting regional conditions.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study used a qualitative approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of evolving regional geopolitics in the southern and Central Asian regions. It is mainly an exploratory study that used secondary sources, such as policy papers, books, research reports, articles that provided essential context for understanding the Pakistan's relations with the CARs and the broader regional dynamics. These documents offer insights into the official positions, strategies, and priorities of governments involved, shedding light on diplomatic efforts, economic agendas, and security concerns.

## **THE EVOLVING REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS**

After the military withdrawal of the US/NATO, the power vacuum left and the new Taliban government rise again in Afghanistan after two long decades has created geopolitical implications for regional countries like Pakistan, China and Central Asian republics. After the US/NATO military withdrawal from the region and diverted Russian attention and diminished influence in the face of war with Ukraine, the Central Asian region, may move from a shelter belt status to a focused

regionalism. The end of direct Great Powers' competition, the Russia-Ukraine war, the end of the war in Afghanistan and economic growth in Central Asia all necessitate and drive the Central Asian region to open up in the Southern direction to overcome their geography-induced challenge and revive the historical links between Central and South Asia (Khan, 2022).

Another facet of the shifting geopolitics of South and Central Asia is China's BRI, which has emerged as a crucial player in redefining the region's connections. The CPEC is a flagship project of the BRI, aiming to link China's western region to the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar in Pakistan. BRI has the potential to significantly impact the economic and geopolitical landscapes of South and Central Asia (Rauf & Saud, 2021). China is growing its regional influence and strengthening economic relations with neighbouring countries by investing in infrastructure projects and opening new trade routes. Some countries, however, are concerned about the debt loads involved with BRI projects and the possibility that China may exert undue influence over their economy and political systems.

An important exception in the evolving regional geopolitics has been the continuation of the Sino-



Figure 3: Khyber Pass Economic Corridor

Russian condominium in Central Asia in the changing regional circumstances (Pizzolo & Carteny, 2022). Russo-Chinese collaboration at the global and regional levels reduces the possibilities of competition between the two countries in Central Asia for the time being. China acknowledges the leading role of Russia in Central Asia while Russia commodities China's trade, energy and economic interests in the region. Pakistan foresees the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia Corridor perfecting CPEC (Khan, 2022). The network of this corridor comprises various components including TAPI, CASA 1000, TAP 500, the Trans-Afghan Railway line, and Roads and Railway corridors of ECO and CAREC. Another key component of the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia corridor is the Khyber Pass Economic Corridor, with financial help from the World Bank worth \$402 million, which is also part of Corridors 5 and 6 of CAREC (The World Bank, 2019). Regional connectivity is essential for supporting sustainable development because it allows products, services, and people to flow across borders more easily. It facilitates the flow of ideas, knowledge, and resources, hence stimulating economic growth and creating job possibilities. By developing relations with Central Asia through initiatives such as the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia Corridor, Pakistan hopes to capitalize on the potential of regional connectivity to create sustainable development and better its people's lives.

After the withdrawal of the US from the region geopolitics changed abruptly and Afghanistan has become a regional responsibility. The neighbours of Afghanistan are the direct stakeholders in the stability and development of the country. The presence of Afghanistan into regional economic and

connectivity processes is imperious for regional security and connectivity. All the regional connectivity plans including TAPI, Trans-Afghan railway, CASA 1000, TAP 500 and ECO Road 1-7, SCO and CAREC corridors 5 and 6 pass and re-pass Afghanistan as a regional cornerstone.

Therefore, peace and stability in Afghanistan is a prerequisite for any meaningful connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia in particular and in the region generally. Pakistan has framed "Vision Central Asia Policy" to enhance political, economic and trade relations with this strategically and economically important region (Khan & Begum, 2022). With changes in regional geopolitical structure, Pakistan has revised its foreign policy to focus on geo-economics. For Central Asian Republics, the route through Afghanistan and Pakistan is the key. This can be seen from the current positive progresses in relations between Pakistan and Central Asia. CARs have renewed interest in Afghanistan and seek some kind of accommodation with the Taliban to advance the cause of trans-Afghan transport to overcome their geography-induced challenge (Starr, 2022).

Geo-economics is a synonym for regional connectivity particularly in the direction of Central Asia via Afghanistan. President Arif Alvi in his interview with TRT World also emphasized Pakistan's changing policy from geo-politics to geo-economics the study also argued that geo-economics is the new geo-politics. While geopolitics concentrates on traditional power dynamics and state competition, geoeconomics emphasizes the importance of economic interests and regional connectedness in determining international relations. Unlike geopolitics, which frequently results in conflict and zero-sum games, geoeconomics aims to encourage collaboration, mutual gain, and long-term development through economic integration and trade relationships.

According to James Durso, connecting with Pakistan and beyond through Afghanistan is a necessity for landlocked Central Asia. This southern link allows Central Asia to avoid Russia and China's gravitational influence. As a result, the United States must not limit or obstruct regional integration arrangements through Afghanistan, as this would be equal to handing Russia and China a political victory (Durso, 2022). Furthermore, the departure of external powers and resolving regional conflicts give Central Asia a unique chance. By embracing focused regionalism and renewing historical ties with South Asia, the region can move beyond its "shelter belt" status and realise its full potential, becoming a significant role in the changing Asian economy.

### **Historical Context of Connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia**

Central Asia is significant due to its strategic geographical location as a region linking Asian, European and African continents globally. The region is also of much importance due to its resource base; hydrocarbons, precious minerals, metals, and most wanted agrarian products like cotton and grain. Importantly these resources are available there in exportable surpluses. Due to these two factors, Central Asia, throughout its history, from the era of the ancient Silk Route to the age of imperialism the Great Game which the Russians called Tournament of Shadows, from Mackinder's heartland concept to Brizinstky Grand Chessboard and from post-cold war era to post 9/11 period, has remained a zone of great power competition. In the contemporary era, the major powers compete to control this geographical entity for furthering their global and regional strategic and economic interests while the neighbouring countries are interested in access to the region's energy and consumer market and also to provide an outlet to the landlocked region and serve as a gateway to the region.

Adam Saud speaking at the Seminar argues that some usually say that “Central Asia is a gateway for Pakistan” but he denied saying that “Pakistan is a gateway for Central Asia”. Further, explain that Pakistan has a market of 250 million people and Central Asia despite having more land has less than 80 million populations. Another part is to access the warm water and expand the trade in other goods other than hydrocarbons, and precious minerals. In terms of economic potential and consumer market, Pakistan holds a stronger position compared to Central Asia, making it less likely for Central Asian countries to view Pakistan as their primary gateway for trade and economic cooperation.

Shabir also stated that for Central Asia Afghanistan and Pakistan are the priorities. According to the map Shangani and Beijing are more than 5000km far away on the other side Russian black sea is again 4000km away from these Central Asian republics. the only economical route from the is the Arabian Sea which is 2500km from the capitals. Furthermore, he elaborates that if the Central Asian Republic opens up in the southern direction, it can break the geographical gravitational pull of Russia and China. That way the trade is increased via Afghanistan and the relations are more upgraded. He also suggests that the route via Afghanistan should not be impeded because it will release pressure from the Central Asian Region.

Maintaining the route via Afghanistan is crucial for the Central Asian region as it provides direct and efficient access to international markets through the Arabian Sea. This not only promotes economic growth and trade opportunities but also helps to diversify their trade routes, reducing dependence on Russia and China (Rauf & Saud, 2021). Allowing the Central Asian Republics to have alternative options for trade, enhances their autonomy and strengthens their geopolitical position in the region. Specific trade options available through the Arabian Sea include exporting textiles and apparel to European countries, importing electronics and machinery from East Asia, and engaging in marine trade with Middle Eastern countries.

These trade channels can provide new opportunities for economic growth and development in Central Asian Republics, as well as increase their worldwide competitiveness. Economic corridors in Central and South Asia are classified into three types: developing corridors, proposed/planned corridors, and finished corridors. In 1995, Pakistan, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan signed the Quadrilateral Traffic and Transit Agreement (QTTA) to facilitate transit traffic and trade among

member nations (Rauf, 2021). The developing corridors are functional and could potentially connect to the BRI.

The road connecting Karachi-Rawalpindi-Hassan Abdal-Gilgit-Khunjrab (Pakistan-China Border) and Kashgar-Torugart (China-Kyrgyzstan Border) to Bishkek-Akjol-Kordai (Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan Border)-Almaty (Kazakhstan) is roughly 3,710 kilometres long. Other Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, have also expressed interest in joining the QTTA. Economic corridors



Figure 1: Pakistan's CEPC and the Central Asian QTTA Routes

promote regional cooperation and socioeconomic progress.

Another connectivity framework component is connecting energy-rich regions to energy-sparse areas. In this regard, The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline, a 1,814-



**Figure 2: The Turkmenistan- Afghanistan-Pakistan India Gas Pipeline**

intertwined with the fate of the project in the participating countries. By enhancing trade links between Pakistan and the CARs, the CPEC aims to address the current trade volume deficiencies between these regions. China's engagement in Central Asia is expanding, and Pakistan offers one of the fastest routes for Chinese trade. With China's support, previously inaccessible areas of Central and South Asian states are being developed and interconnected. The CPEC's initiation in Pakistan has led to the revitalization or construction of numerous old and new connectivity projects in Central Asia (Rauf, 2021).

### **Roles, and Interests of Russia, Iran and China in South and Central Asian Integration**

After the new regime in Afghanistan, the roles and interests of regional countries like Russia and China in South and Central Asian connectivity can shape regional dynamics and have implications for the balance of power in the broader South and Central Asian region. Ukraine war has advanced the Russia-Eurasian Project by replacing the Greater European Program with the Greater Eurasian Partnership. Because of the Western sanctions on Russia, it is now looking for new opportunities. Russia also has an old plan to open to the great Indian Ocean via central Asia and Pakistan. Opening up the Indian Ocean via Central Asia and Pakistan might provide Russia with new economic routes and access to important maritime lanes.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), initiated by Russian President Vladimir Putin, aims to establish a common market for 180 million people to foster sustainable economic growth. However, the organisation has faced challenges in the beginning due to growing differences among member states, leading to trade disputes. While historically affiliated with Russia, empirical evidence suggests that member states' divergent political aspirations and power imbalances hinder significant economic cooperation. Some view the EAEU as a tool for Russian strategic interests. Furthermore, the EAEU can achieve economic integration in Eurasia and provide diversified opportunities for participating states to attain sustainable prosperity (Saud & Kalim, 2020).

Russia, historically a powerful actor in Central Asia, maintains close relations with the region. The dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in the formation of autonomous Central Asian governments, although Russia has attempted to maintain influence through a variety of tactics

(Starr, 2022). One of its primary priorities is security, as it sees Central Asia as a buffer zone between threats from the south and west. Russia maintains military bases in nations such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, demonstrating its strategic interest in stability. Economically, Russia wants to maintain its position as a major commercial partner and energy supplier to Central Asian countries.

In this regard, China and Central Asia have gained added significance for Russia. Eurasian Economic Union is the main tool where some of the Central Asian states are members while others are in negotiation to join. Russia plans to open up to South Asia, the Indian Ocean and beyond via Central Asia. Russia and China have agreed to harmonize BRI and the Eurasian Union in the larger context of Eurasian integration. However Western sanctions on Russia and Pakistan's dependence on US-backed financial institutions complicate Pakistan Russia's smooth cooperation (Khan, 2022).

China views Central Asia as a strategic bridge to Europe and a vital source of resources for its BRI. Its economic influence is undeniable, with significant investments in infrastructure projects. Unlike Russia's focus on security, China prioritizes economic development and stability for a conducive environment for BRI projects (Rauf & Saud, 2021). This economic focus could potentially complement Russia's security concerns, creating space for pragmatic cooperation. Possible areas of cooperation between Russia and China in the Central Asian region and Afghanistan could include joint investment in infrastructure projects, such as the development of transportation networks and energy pipelines.

For China, Central Asia is also an important link towards European and African markets and an energy source at the doorstep. BRI was announced in Central Asia in 2013. So, both the powers have stakes in the security and economic development of the region due to geographical contiguity. Both the powers have stakes in the opening up of Central Asia in the southern direction (Rauf & Saud, 2021). The balance of power in the region will depend on the ability of Russia and China to manage this competition. Ideally, they could find common ground on issues like regional security and economic development, fostering a multipolar order where Central Asian states have more agency in shaping their future. This would require open communication, mutual respect for interests, and a focus on win-win projects that benefit all parties.

Iran as a neighbour realizes the importance of a stable Afghanistan and it can play an important role. As a neighbour, Iran realizes the need for a stable Afghanistan for its own security and economic interests. Iran has actively supported a variety of projects aimed at strengthening Afghanistan's stability and economic development. It has provided financial aid, infrastructure support, and trade opportunities to help Afghanistan's economy grow. Furthermore, Iran has played an important role in supporting diplomatic discussions and peace talks between Afghanistan and other regional powers, contributing to regional stability (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022).

Despite ideological and historical divides, Iran has maintained a diplomatic relationship with the Taliban administration. Iran was one of the few countries that retained a diplomatic presence in Kabul following the Taliban's takeover in 2021, suggesting a readiness to collaborate with the new government (Yousif & Kakar, 2022). This pragmatic approach stems from Iran's aim to preserve its interests and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for anti-Iranian extremists.



### **Importance of Afghanistan's Peace and Stability in Promoting Economic Cooperation**

The stability of Afghanistan holds significant importance in the context of South and Central Asia connectivity. The instability in Afghanistan poses serious challenges for both Pakistan and the CARs. It stifles economic cooperation and regional integration because businesses struggle to function in an unpredictable political situation. Furthermore, the influx of migrants and the spread of extremism from Afghanistan pose security challenges to both Pakistan and the Central Asian Republic, making Afghanistan's stability a critical component in their security and prosperity. As of February 2023, a report by UNHCR states that 251,000 Afghans have approached UNHCR Pakistan for registration and asylum claims since August 2021, requiring USD 176 million in money to resource in fiscal year 2023.

According to registered data from UNHCR, a significant number of Afghan refugees, asylum-seekers, and individuals in refugee-like situations have been in various countries in the region. As of December 31, 2023, the total number stands at approximately 5,823,000. Iran holds the highest percentage of those which stands at 64.4% and secondly, Pakistan have registered 35.2% of the total. The large number of Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers in neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran, poses significant security challenges. The instability in Afghanistan, coupled with the influx of migrants, has contributed to the spread of extremism in the region. This, in turn, has raised concerns about the security and prosperity of both Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics.

As Arif Alvi, former president of Pakistan in his interview with TRT World stated. that peace and stability in Afghanistan are important for Pakistan; he then said that if peace prevails in Afghanistan will be the biggest win for Pakistan (Suberker, 2021). Furthermore, in the interview, President Arif Alvi said that Pakistan would invest in Afghanistan. Pakistan has hosted 4 million refugees in the past. He said that was just because of the good well-being between the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan. He was very optimistic about the people of Afghanistan, that they have learned the skills of a better economic society and they can take part in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. At the same time, Pakistan's efforts to rebuild Afghanistan will always be on the table for Afghanistan (Suberker, 2021).

For Pakistan and the CARs to cooperate economically, peace and stability in Afghanistan are necessary. A stable Afghanistan creates an environment that is favourable for business and investment, facilitating the smooth movement of products and services across borders. Furthermore, peace and security in Afghanistan play an essential role in building trust and confidence among Pakistan, the CARs, and other neighbouring nations. This trust is necessary for establishing strong diplomatic ties and boosting economic collaboration. Similarly, a secure Afghanistan enables the free flow of goods and services across borders, facilitating trade and investment opportunities for all parties concerned.

A secure Afghanistan can help regional economic integration projects like TAPI, Trans-Afghan railway, CASA 1000, TAP 500 and ECO Road 1-7, SCO and CAREC corridors 5 and 6 pass and re-pass Afghanistan. Therefore, peace and stability in Afghanistan is a prerequisite for any meaningful connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia, particularly in the region generally.

This would encourage cross-border trade and improve their economic integration with their neighbours. A stable Afghanistan would not only stimulate trade, improve connectivity, and attract foreign investment within the country, but would also have a substantial economic influence on the region as a whole. It would foster regional trade, investment, and collaboration by allowing CARs to access world markets via transit routes through Afghanistan. This would promote cross-border trade and economic integration with adjacent countries, increasing economic development and prosperity for the entire region.

Pakistan's involvement with Western alliances has been a topic of debate among scholars, who have critiqued the impact of Western influence on the country and the region. In the 1970s and 1980s, Pakistan joined these alliances to secure political, strategic, and economic benefits, as well as to contain the spread of communism (Ishfaq et al., 2022). Furthermore, Pakistan had paid a very huge price for joining the Western alliances in the form of separation of East Pakistan from the rest of Pakistan at that time. While it is true that Pakistan joined these alliances to contain communism, the geopolitical and socioeconomic implications are equally important, which Pakistan could not obtain from Central Asia and Afghanistan in past.

Some also expressed concern about Pakistan's current political condition, implying that the country may not be in a strong position to play an important role in regional events, particularly those involving Central Asia and Afghanistan (Jamal, 2024). This is because of Pakistan's heavy reliance on Western aid and financial assistance, which has led to a dependence on foreign powers and a potential loss of sovereignty. Furthermore, the influence of Western powers has shaped Pakistan's domestic policies and governance, often prioritizing their interests over those of the Pakistani people.

### **Legitimacy of the New Taliban Government**

The rise of the new Taliban government in Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a dramatic shift in the region's political landscape with both positive and negative consequences. There were also concerns among the people of Afghanistan about the previous Western-backed governments. The August 2009 presidential elections, in which incumbent Hamid Karzai defeated his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, demonstrated the corruption and lack of legitimacy that pervaded the process, resulting in a loss of popular trust. The election was marred by security vulnerabilities, low voter turnout, insufficient voter education, and allegations of ballot stuffing. The 2014 election provided little optimism for a more open or egalitarian process, albeit a negotiated settlement after a lengthy recount resulted in the establishment of the National Unity Government, which included Ashraf Ghani as President and Abdullah Abdullah as CEO (Cogan & Gill, 2022).

The group's return to power after two decades raises critical questions about its ability to overcome prolonged instability, foster economic growth, and engage in regional cooperation. While the Taliban have expressed a desire for investment, trade route development, and economic activity, significant challenges stand in their way. Haibtullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's supreme leader, has called on the world community to support the administration in redeveloping the country. Countries such as Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran have previously provided aid to the Taliban rule (Yousif & Kakar, 2022).

During their previous rule from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban implemented strict and oppressive policies that severely hindered economic growth and regional cooperation. Their restrictions on women's rights, education, and cultural activities led to a significant decline in human capital and limited participation in the workforce. Additionally, their support for extremist groups and involvement in illicit activities, such as the opium trade, further undermined stability and hindered economic development.

The Taliban have managed Afghanistan's economy better than expected, drawing on lessons learned during their 20 years as an insurgency. They previously competed with the former government by collecting significant revenue, issuing tax receipts for transporters, and granting mining permits. Notably, corruption has been reduced, especially in customs, with efforts to curb smuggling and bribery, as well as the elimination of separate trade levies once imposed by the insurgency (Byrd, 2023). Furthermore, the withdrawal of most international aid after August 2021 has eliminated a key source of money that was prone to corruption.

The new Taliban government must address these historical challenges and demonstrate a genuine commitment to fostering economic prosperity and regional integration. But today some see some potential in the Taliban building the state structure. Taliban commanders have lately announced a ban on early marriage and the sale of young girls for marriage, indicating a desire to accept responsibility and create new rules (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022).

Pakistan has long been accused of assisting the Taliban by international organizations and anti-Taliban factions in Afghanistan. When examined through Pakistan's lens, it is evident that every state strives to preserve its interests. For a variety of reasons, Pakistan has maintained tight ties with the extremist group throughout the years (Altaf et al., 2022).

The new Taliban government faces a difficult task in establishing stability. Decades of war have left Afghanistan extremely fragmented, with ethnic and political differences boiling beneath the surface. The Taliban are not a unified body, and potential power disputes within the organization could lead to further conflict. Furthermore, the presence of other factions, such as ISIS-K, presents a huge security risk (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022). ISIS-K, also known as the Islamic State Khorasan Province, is a major security threat in Afghanistan and the region. This ISIS group has shown to be extremely merciless, carrying out multiple lethal attacks on civilians, government officials, and international forces. Their presence complicates Afghanistan's security situation and adds to the obstacles confronting the new regime in restoring stability and preventing the revival of extremist beliefs.

Furthermore, the international community continues to be concerned about the Taliban's human rights record, particularly its treatment of women. This has led to a reluctance to provide financial help, which is critical for reconstructing Afghanistan's war-torn infrastructure and restoring its economy. This lack of assistance feeds a vicious cycle since economic hardship can exacerbate instability and radicalism (Yousif & Kakar, 2022).

With the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, it became the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Many states have recalled their diplomatic missions of concern for their safety in an unpredictable atmosphere, but some are more welcoming than others, like the People's Republic of China and Iran (Helštýnová, 2023). These countries have taken a more realistic approach to the Taliban, recognizing them as the de facto administration of Afghanistan. While they have voiced concern

about human rights issues, their primary focus is on protecting their interests, which include economic ties and regional stability (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022).

The current scenario in Afghanistan also indicates the formation of new or strengthened regional partnerships. To combat the growing economic crisis, the Taliban wish to join the China-led economic network in the region (Anjum et al., 2021). The current scenario in Afghanistan also indicates the formation of new or strengthened regional partnerships. To combat the growing economic crisis, the Taliban wish to join the China-led economic network in the region. With the backing of Pakistan and other influential regional powers, China is working towards fostering a stable Afghanistan that benefits the entire region ("SCO set to come into focus," 2021).

Afghanistan's Taliban government remains unrecognized by any country globally, with many of its leaders are subject to international sanctions. The country's seat at the United Nations is still held by representatives of former President Ashraf Ghani's government. Despite this, nations like China and Pakistan continue to maintain diplomatic missions in Kabul. The UN has, to date, rejected the Taliban's request for Afghanistan's seat on three separate occasions ("Taliban cuts ties," 2024).

### **Implications for Pakistan and CARs**

If the Taliban government fails to create a more peaceful Afghanistan Instability in Afghanistan may spread to its neighbours, including Pakistan and the CARs, posing security risks, escalating terrorist threats, and disrupting trade and economic activity. Regional stability and economic growth are threatened by the existence of extremist organizations and the possibility of Talibanization and the re-emergence of Tehrik-E Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (Helštýnová, 2023). The Taliban-led government must emphasize peace and security to reduce these dangers and build an atmosphere conducive to economic growth and cooperation.

According Qazi (2022), Pakistan's decades-long interventionist policy in Afghanistan has failed, and the Taliban, who are currently in power, have become a source of concern for Pakistan. This demands a changed policy strategy for dealing with the situation in neighbouring Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban rule granted the TTP full rein in Afghanistan, freeing nearly 2,000 TTP militants imprisoned in Afghan jails by previous Afghan presidents. Terrorist incidents in Pakistan surged by 56% in 2021.

Given the potential risks and concerns associated with the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan, it may be prudent for Pakistan to adopt a two-pronged approach. Firstly, Pakistan should prioritize diplomatic engagement and negotiation with the Taliban, advocating for peaceful and inclusive governance in Afghanistan. Secondly, Pakistan should strengthen its security measures, including enhancing border control and intelligence cooperation, to mitigate the spillover effects of instability and terrorism. By combining diplomatic efforts with robust security measures, Pakistan can navigate the challenges posed by the Taliban-led government while safeguarding its own interests and regional stability (Qazi, 2022).

The situation in Afghanistan may breed uncertainty and scare away prospective investors, impeding efforts at regional integration and economic cooperation. President Arif Alvi also said in his interview with TRT World that other than Afghanistan people themselves Pakistan has been the biggest loser after Afghanistan in the last 30 to 40 years in terms of losing human lives (Suberker, 2021). Pakistan recognizes the importance of a stable Afghanistan for regional integration and

economic cooperation. President Arif Alvi's statement highlights the significant impact that Afghanistan's instability has had on Pakistan over the past few decades, underscoring the need for a secure and prosperous Afghanistan.

President Arif Alvi explains that instability in Afghanistan is not only important for Pakistan but has equal importance for other neighbouring countries like Tajikistan. It is shorter to fly from Tajikistan to Islamabad than to fly from Islamabad to Karachi (Suberker, 2021). However, difficult security situation in Afghanistan, which is located between Tajikistan and Pakistan, direct routes are avoided and bilateral exchanges are hampered. Despite a geographic advantage that should make travel and communication between Pakistan and Tajikistan simpler, the instability in Afghanistan prevents the two nations from forging stronger connections and cooperating.

Pakistan used to benefit from the export concentration with CARs, however, since 2003, their export performance and intensity have been gradually dropping until 2017. Pakistan's export performance and CAR export intensity were significantly impacted by the unrest in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. Bilateral trade was hampered by the difficult environment brought on by the fighting in Afghanistan. The insecurity in Afghanistan needs to be addressed in the future, and steps should be taken to foster trade and economic cooperation between Pakistan and CARs (Khan et al., 2019).

The stability of Afghanistan is beneficial for regional integration projects like the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) by fostering economic cooperation and regional development. The Arabian Sea through Pakistani seaports is the quickest maritime route for Central Asian Republics. Both a road connection to Gwadar Port and a rail line connects Central Asia to this port. The closest railheads in Central Asia are in Kuchka and Tirmiz. The commodities might then be transported to Heart and then to Karachi or the Gwadar Port via Kandahar and Quetta (Adnan & Fatima, 2015). From there, the commodities can be transported to other ports in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The port of Karachi is a major port for the import and export of goods to and from Central Asia. Gwadar Port is also a major port for the import and export of goods from Central Asia.

For land routes Pakistan and Central Asia have many options and all routes go through Afghanistan. like, Salang Pass, Kabul, Jalalabad, Peshawar, Lahore, and Karachi are all along the route. Route from Tajikistan to Badakhshan, over the Pyanj River, to the western passes of Frontier Province, and then on to Peshawar, Lahore, and Karachi. Kashgar, Gilgit, Rawalpindi, Lahore, and Karachi can be reached by the Karakoram Highway (Adnan & Fatima, 2015).

From Afghanistan's point of view, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) holds significant geostrategic importance, and its extension to Afghanistan can have a transformative impact on the country's economic development. Afghanistan can benefit greatly and see increased economic activity by being connected to the larger CPEC network. Islamabad promised to build a 265 km long motorway between Peshawar and Kabul as part of the CPEC. This connection will integrate Afghanistan with other regions and also allow her to start commercial activities through the Indian Ocean.

The expansion of CPEC to Afghanistan would boost economic activity as well as regional connectivity and integration. It would promote regional cooperation and trade links by fortifying

the economic relations between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian Republics. The creation of transport and commercial corridors would ease the flow of people and goods, fostering regional economic integration and stability. So, if the Taliban leadership fails to restore peace in Afghanistan, unrest may extend to neighbouring countries, posing security issues, increasing terrorist threats, and impeding commerce and economic activity. The rise of violence and terrorism in Afghanistan runs the risk of destabilizing neighbouring countries and jeopardizing regional peace and growth. The report found that Pakistan's decades-long interventionist policy in Afghanistan has failed, and the Taliban have become a cause of concern for Pakistan.

## CONCLUSION

South and Central Asia, a region rich with ancient trade routes, diverse cultures, and a complex geopolitical history, finds Afghanistan as a pivotal juncture. The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan have created a power vacuum, necessitating a re-evaluation of regional dynamics. Improved infrastructure – transportation networks, energy corridors, and trade routes – can significantly boost economic activity and trade flows between Pakistan and the CARs. However, achieving regional integration in South and Central Asia is not without its challenges. Historical conflicts, territorial disputes, and the emergence of the Taliban regime again on the soil of Afghanistan can hinder the process. Furthermore, the presence of extremist groups and competing geopolitical interests from major powers also pose obstacles to cooperation and hinder the smooth implementation of integration initiatives. The Taliban government must prioritize Peace and security to foster a conducive environment for economic growth. Pakistan's historical interventionist policy in Afghanistan has not succeeded, necessitating a revised strategy that includes diplomatic engagement and enhanced security measures. The roles and interests of regional powers like Russia and China in South and Central Asian integration are pivotal, influencing regional dynamics and impacting the broader balance of power. The evolving regional geopolitics of South and Central Asia have opened avenues for enhanced connectivity and economic cooperation. China as an economic power and Russia's strategic shifts have shifted the geopolitical landscape, with China's BRI reshaping connectivity in the region. In the wake of the US withdrawal, Pakistan and Central Asia need to explore new mechanisms and strategies to enhance connectivity. Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics have historically maintained good relations, but security concerns and infrastructure gaps have been the biggest concerns for the region for decades.

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