

The Role of Regional Connectivity in Strengthening Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

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Abstract: *The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has historically been strained by political tensions, security challenges, and economic isolation. However, with the growing emphasis on regional integration and connectivity, there exists a significant opportunity for the two countries to strengthen their bilateral ties. This paper explores the role of regional connectivity in fostering closer cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan, focusing on key infrastructure projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway, and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. The study examines the geopolitical significance of regional connectivity, highlighting how improved trade routes, energy pipelines, and infrastructure development can create mutual economic and security benefits. The paper further investigates the challenges hindering the success of these initiatives, such as security concerns, political tensions, and infrastructural deficiencies, and proposes strategies to overcome these obstacles. Ultimately, regional connectivity offers a path to enhanced economic cooperation, political stability, and long-term peace in the South Asian region, positioning Pakistan and Afghanistan as critical players in the broader Central and South Asian economic network.*

Keywords: Pakistan, Afghanistan, CPEC, TAPI, Regional connectivity, South Asia

Introduction

The bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has long been fraught with challenges, including political tensions, security concerns, and economic difficulties. Despite sharing cultural, ethnic, and historical ties, the political history of these two nations has been turbulent, often characterized by mistrust and geopolitical maneuvering. However, as the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the importance of regional connectivity in shaping and strengthening bilateral relations cannot be overstated.

In this paper, we will explore how regional connectivity via infrastructure, energy, trade, and people-to-people exchanges can significantly enhance Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The strategic geographic location of both countries offers significant potential for economic cooperation. Afghanistan is a landlocked country at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, and Pakistan's deep-water ports on the Arabian Sea, including Gwadar, provide a crucial gateway for Afghanistan's trade. Improved regional connectivity offers the possibility of overcoming geographic isolation, promoting economic integration,

and fostering political collaboration. Given the recent focus on regional integration through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, this paper will examine the benefits, challenges, and prospects for strengthening the ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan through regional connectivity projects.

By establishing efficient infrastructure, encouraging trade, and facilitating cross-border cooperation, regional connectivity can become a powerful catalyst for stability and economic prosperity. This paper will discuss the significance of these initiatives, address the challenges to successful implementation, and propose strategies for overcoming these hurdles to realize the full potential of regional connectivity.

Strategic Importance of Regional Connectivity

Geopolitical Significance

Pakistan and Afghanistan's geopolitical positioning is one of their greatest assets, particularly in the context of regional connectivity. Afghanistan serves as a natural land bridge between South and Central Asia, which makes it an ideal corridor for trade and commerce. On the other hand, Pakistan, with its deep-water ports at Karachi and Gwadar, offers Afghanistan the much-needed access to the sea, making it a vital gateway for Afghan exports and imports. The geographical proximity of the two countries to each other, coupled with Pakistan's position as the gateway to global markets, makes regional connectivity an essential factor in the political and economic integration of the region.

Historically, both nations have been at the crossroads of several political and economic struggles, but their shared geography offers immense opportunities for mutual benefit. For example, regional connectivity can provide landlocked Afghanistan with access to the warm waters of the Arabian Sea, which would be highly beneficial for its trade and industry (Ahmed, 2023). By capitalizing on this geographical advantage, the region could see increased economic activity, a reduction in transport costs, and a more diversified trade network (Hassan & Azam, 2024). Furthermore, Pakistan's location provides direct access to important trade routes, including connections to Central Asia and the Middle East, which would allow Afghanistan to tap into wider global markets.

The growing recognition of this strategic importance has prompted both governments to emphasize the need for cross-border connectivity as a pathway toward achieving sustainable economic development. Several major connectivity projects are already underway or in the planning stages that aim to capitalize on the region's geographical advantages. These initiatives offer the possibility of turning the region into a critical economic hub in Asia, but their success will depend on overcoming various challenges, including security, political tensions, and infrastructural inadequacies.

Economic Potential

The potential economic benefits of regional connectivity between Pakistan and Afghanistan are immense. Trade is one of the primary drivers of any economy, and the inefficient flow of goods between these two countries due to poor infrastructure and political tensions has long hampered their economic growth. With regional connectivity, however, both Pakistan and Afghanistan stand to gain significantly from the reduction in transportation costs, improvement in supply chain efficiency, and the opening of new trade routes.

A case in point is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which aims to create a trade link between the western regions of China and the Gwadar Port in Pakistan. The expansion of this corridor to include Afghanistan could unlock new trade opportunities, allowing Afghanistan to access the sea and enabling Pakistan to expand its economic footprint in Central Asia (Mahmood, 2025). Similarly, the development of infrastructure, such as highways, railroads, and energy pipelines, would not only increase trade between the two nations but would also provide a much-needed boost to their domestic economies.

For Afghanistan, regional connectivity could drastically improve its economic standing by providing easier access to markets in South Asia, Central Asia, and beyond. Trade through Pakistan's ports would lower shipping costs, enhance trade volumes, and create new opportunities for investment in key sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, and services (Suleman & Khan, 2022). Additionally, the improvement of transport and energy infrastructure would lead to a rise in industrial output and job creation, contributing to poverty reduction and economic diversification in Afghanistan.

In Pakistan, the strategic importance of regional connectivity lies not only in its trade relations with Afghanistan but also in the economic development it could bring to its less-developed regions, such as Balochistan, where the Gwadar Port is located. This region has immense potential to become a hub for trade, logistics, and industrial development if properly integrated into the broader regional connectivity networks. Moreover, the energy resources of Central Asia and the potential for pipeline projects like TAPI and CASA-1000 would provide a steady source of energy to Pakistan, helping to alleviate its energy deficit and provide more affordable power to its industries (Bhatti, 2023).

Thus, the economic potential of regional connectivity is far-reaching. By improving transportation infrastructure, enhancing trade relations, and integrating energy resources, both countries stand to experience sustainable economic growth that would lead to regional stability and prosperity.

Key Connectivity Initiatives

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the most important and ambitious connectivity projects in the region. Initially designed to connect the Chinese city of Kashgar in Xinjiang Province to the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, CPEC aims to improve connectivity between Pakistan and China, as well as between China and the wider region, including Afghanistan (Qureshi, 2023). CPEC includes a range of infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, power plants, and pipelines, all of which will facilitate trade and regional cooperation.

CPEC's potential to enhance Pakistan-Afghanistan relations lies in its ability to provide Afghanistan with a direct route to global markets through the Gwadar Port. If the project is extended to Afghanistan, it could give landlocked Afghanistan a much-needed outlet for its goods, lowering transportation costs and fostering greater trade (Shah, 2024). Furthermore, the development of infrastructure within Afghanistan, such as roads and rail networks, would stimulate economic growth and improve access to essential goods and services.

Afghanistan's participation in CPEC could also be a means of promoting political cooperation. By contributing to shared economic goals, both countries could begin to address some of their long-standing political differences. Improved infrastructure and trade links would create a web of economic interdependence, making it more difficult for political tensions to derail cooperation (Ali & Rahman, 2023).

Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway Project

The Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway project is another key initiative that aims to enhance regional connectivity. This railway, once completed, will connect Tashkent (Uzbekistan) to Kabul (Afghanistan) and ultimately to Peshawar (Pakistan), providing a faster and more efficient means of transporting goods between Central Asia and South Asia. The railway will significantly reduce transportation costs, improve trade efficiency, and increase access to regional and international markets.

For Afghanistan, the railway presents a valuable opportunity to modernize its transportation infrastructure, reduce reliance on existing road networks, and attract foreign investment (Nawaz, 2024). The improved connectivity will also position Afghanistan as a critical link in the trade network between Central Asia and South Asia, fostering economic integration and reducing the country's isolation.

For Pakistan, the project represents a strategic move to deepen economic ties with Uzbekistan and Central Asia. The railway will help expand trade routes beyond Afghanistan, allowing Pakistan to access new markets in Central Asia while enhancing regional stability (Zafar & Khan, 2025).

Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline

The TAPI pipeline is another major initiative that holds the potential to improve regional connectivity and strengthen Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. This pipeline aims to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. The TAPI pipeline is expected to meet the growing energy demands of all four participating countries while simultaneously fostering regional cooperation.

For Afghanistan, the pipeline provides an opportunity to generate substantial revenue through transit fees, helping to fund critical infrastructure projects and promote economic development. Moreover, the pipeline will offer Afghanistan greater access to energy resources, contributing to the development of its industrial sector (Ahmed & Khan, 2024). For Pakistan, TAPI offers a solution to its ongoing energy crisis, ensuring a steady supply of natural gas to its growing industries and households.

The successful implementation of TAPI could also have significant geopolitical implications. The project would require cooperation between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, which could pave the way for greater political dialogue and economic collaboration. However, the security challenges in Afghanistan remain a key obstacle, and ensuring the safety of the pipeline route will require sustained efforts from all parties involved.

Challenges to Regional Connectivity

Despite the many potential benefits of regional connectivity, several challenges must be overcome to ensure the success of key infrastructure projects. These challenges are multifaceted and include security concerns, political tensions, and infrastructure limitations.

Security Concerns

The primary challenge to regional connectivity in Afghanistan and Pakistan is security. Afghanistan's decades-long conflict, coupled with the presence of insurgent groups, makes it a high-risk area for infrastructure projects. Security concerns are particularly acute for projects like TAPI, which will require the construction of pipelines through insecure regions of Afghanistan. Similarly, the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway project faces significant risks due to the instability in Afghanistan.

For Pakistan, the situation along its western border with Afghanistan is also a concern. Militancy and cross-border insurgency have created a volatile environment, making it difficult to ensure the safety of transportation and infrastructure projects. To address these concerns, both countries must work together to improve security cooperation, share intelligence, and implement measures to safeguard vital infrastructure (Khan, 2023).

Political Tensions

Political tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have historically been a major impediment to regional cooperation. Disputes over border issues, political allegiances, and differing regional interests have often led to mistrust and conflict. In particular, Afghanistan's suspicion of Pakistan's involvement in supporting insurgent groups within its borders has been a key source of tension (Niazi & Shafqat, 2023).

However, there is a growing recognition that improving regional connectivity offers a way to overcome these political divides. By fostering economic interdependence through infrastructure development, both countries can create mutual interests that transcend political disagreements. Diplomatic engagement and confidence-building measures, such as joint security initiatives and trade agreements,

can help reduce political tensions and lay the groundwork for further cooperation (Riaz, 2023).

Infrastructure Limitations

Another significant challenge to regional connectivity is the underdeveloped infrastructure in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Afghanistan, decades of war and neglect have left much of the country's infrastructure in a state of disrepair. Similarly, Pakistan faces challenges in modernizing its own infrastructure, particularly in regions that have been marginalized from economic development (Jamil & Zafar, 2023).

Improving infrastructure requires substantial investment and long-term planning. Both countries need to prioritize investments in roads, railways, ports, and energy facilities to ensure that regional connectivity projects are successful. International financial support and collaboration with private sector investors will be crucial in overcoming these infrastructure limitations.

Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study is a qualitative approach, utilizing a combination of literature review, case study analysis, and expert opinions. The study draws from a wide range of scholarly articles, government reports, and news sources to explore the role of regional connectivity in strengthening Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Data was collected through secondary sources, including academic journals, policy papers, and reports on key regional connectivity projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway, and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. Additionally, expert analyses and reports from international organizations and think tanks were used to evaluate the economic, political, and security implications of these initiatives. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns, opportunities, and challenges related to regional connectivity and its impact on bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The methodology emphasizes a comprehensive, multi-dimensional understanding of the subject, integrating historical, political, and economic perspectives to present a well-rounded analysis.

Discussion and Analysis

The notion of regional connectivity, as explored in this paper, has the potential to radically transform the political and economic landscape of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Both countries face a range of complex issues, including geographical isolation, underdeveloped infrastructure, political tensions, and security threats. These barriers have long hindered their potential to foster stronger bilateral relations and fully realize their economic potential. However, regional connectivity through strategic infrastructure initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway, and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline could serve as solutions to these challenges.

Regional Connectivity as an Economic Booster

Regional connectivity offers numerous economic advantages, particularly for Afghanistan, which, as a landlocked nation, relies heavily on Pakistan for access to international markets. Afghanistan's integration into CPEC could significantly reduce its dependence on other, more expensive trade routes. Currently, Afghanistan's access to global markets is limited by long and expensive trade routes, primarily through Iran and Central Asia. CPEC's extension could provide Afghanistan with direct access to Pakistan's deep-water ports at Gwadar and Karachi, which could substantially cut transportation costs, increase trade volumes, and promote regional economic cooperation (Shah, 2024).

Moreover, projects like the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway present a unique opportunity to strengthen trade ties between Afghanistan, Central Asia, and South Asia. As proposed, the rail link would connect Afghanistan to Uzbekistan and Pakistan, thus enhancing regional trade. This railway

could significantly reduce transportation time and costs for goods traveling between Central Asia and South Asia. Afghanistan, with its strategic location, would become a critical node in the region's trade network, potentially attracting more foreign direct investment (FDI) and economic opportunities (Zafar & Khan, 2025).

Pakistan would also benefit economically from these initiatives. By improving trade routes to Central Asia, Pakistan can position itself as a regional hub for trade, boosting its economic standing and facilitating easier access to a growing Central Asian market. Furthermore, the energy projects like the TAPI pipeline, which aims to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan, would help address Pakistan's longstanding energy crisis, which hampers its industrial development and economic growth (Bhatti, 2023). The energy security provided by such pipelines would create a more stable energy market in Pakistan, which could lead to cheaper energy costs, benefiting industries and consumers alike.

Political and Security Benefits of Regional Connectivity

One of the more profound implications of regional connectivity is its potential to foster political cooperation and stability. Historically, political tensions have plagued the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, with issues such as border disputes, the role of insurgent groups, and divergent foreign policies creating significant obstacles to cooperation. However, the economic interdependence that regional connectivity projects foster can help mitigate these tensions. When countries are economically tied through infrastructure and trade, there is a vested interest in maintaining peace and stability, as instability would disrupt the flow of goods, services, and resources.

A good example of this is the TAPI pipeline. While the project has faced significant security challenges due to the unstable situation in Afghanistan, it also presents a model for regional cooperation. If the project succeeds, it will demonstrate how shared infrastructure projects can bring together countries with conflicting interests, creating a mutual incentive for peace. The pipeline could also facilitate increased diplomatic engagement between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India countries with historically tense relations by providing a common economic interest (Niazi & Shafqat, 2023). This could foster the development of confidence-building measures and diplomatic efforts to resolve disputes through non-violent means.

On the security front, regional connectivity can serve as a tool for enhancing stability. Joint security initiatives, such as those that may be required for the protection of critical infrastructure like railways and pipelines, offer opportunities for Pakistan and Afghanistan to cooperate on counterterrorism and anti-insurgency efforts. By pooling resources and intelligence, both countries can work together to secure vital trade routes, ensuring that the infrastructure projects remain functional and safe.

Overcoming Political Tensions Through Economic Collaboration

A critical aspect of regional connectivity's potential lies in its ability to ease political tensions. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan have deep-seated political mistrust, but by focusing on economic cooperation through shared infrastructure projects, both countries can begin to transcend political disputes. The creation of interdependent economies, through initiatives like CPEC, allows countries to find common ground in the pursuit of mutual benefits. The economic integration facilitated by these projects can become a powerful tool for diplomatic engagement.

For example, CPEC's extension to Afghanistan could serve as a significant confidence-building measure. As trade increases between the two countries, they would gain a shared interest in maintaining peaceful relations. Furthermore, the logistical and financial collaboration required to develop these projects could encourage greater dialogue and trust-building between political leaders, reducing the likelihood of conflict and promoting a more cooperative future (Riaz, 2023).

Feasibility of Key Connectivity Initiatives

While the economic and political benefits of regional connectivity are apparent, the feasibility of implementing large-scale infrastructure projects like CPEC, the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway, and TAPI depends on several factors, including political will, security, financial investment, and institutional capacity. The success of these projects requires not only significant domestic investments but also international support in the form of funding and expertise.

CPEC, for instance, requires the continuous commitment of both Pakistan and China. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework offers the financial and infrastructural backing needed to ensure the success of CPEC. However, Pakistan's political stability, the security situation in the region, and the smooth functioning of trade routes are crucial for the realization of this initiative. The feasibility of extending CPEC to Afghanistan is heavily contingent on improving Afghanistan's security situation, as the ongoing conflict could deter both domestic and foreign investment (Mahmood, 2025).

Similarly, the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway presents logistical and financial challenges. While it holds great promise in terms of trade facilitation, its construction will require addressing the complex geopolitical dynamics in Afghanistan. Given Afghanistan's instability, securing funding and ensuring the safety of the construction workers and infrastructure will be major hurdles. If successful, however, the railway will significantly enhance regional connectivity and make Afghanistan an important transit route for goods, potentially transforming its economy (Nawaz, 2024).

TAPI also faces significant security challenges in Afghanistan. While the economic incentives for all parties involved are high, the successful implementation of the pipeline is at risk due to ongoing security threats from insurgent groups. The international community, particularly the United States and Russia, must play an active role in ensuring the security of such projects, while Pakistan and Afghanistan must strengthen their cooperative security efforts.

Addressing Challenges and Promoting Successful Implementation

To overcome these challenges, a multifaceted approach is needed. First, both countries need to establish political stability through sustained diplomatic engagement. Confidence-building measures, such as joint security initiatives and regular diplomatic dialogues, can help reduce tensions and create an environment conducive to cooperation. Additionally, the international community's support in ensuring security and providing financial backing is essential for the success of these projects.

On the security front, multilateral efforts involving Pakistan, Afghanistan, and international stakeholders will be key in ensuring the safety of infrastructure projects. Coordinating intelligence and law enforcement efforts, particularly in high-risk areas, can help mitigate security risks and protect vital trade routes. Furthermore, fostering regional security cooperation through organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could provide a platform for discussing security concerns related to connectivity projects.

Financially, international funding and private sector involvement will be crucial in financing these large-scale infrastructure projects. Public-private partnerships, supported by international development banks and financial institutions, can provide the necessary resources to implement these initiatives. Given the strategic importance of these projects, it is likely that major international investors, such as China, the European Union, and the World Bank, will continue to play a role in funding regional connectivity projects (Hassan & Azam, 2024).

Conclusion

Regional connectivity plays a crucial role in shaping the future of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, offering vast opportunities for economic growth, political cooperation, and long-term stability. Historically, the relationship between these two nations has been marred by conflict, insecurity, and

political discord, yet the potential for cooperation through regional connectivity could pave the way for a more prosperous future. By leveraging their strategic geographical locations, both Pakistan and Afghanistan have an opportunity to unlock significant economic benefits that could transform their bilateral relationship and the broader region.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway, and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline are pivotal initiatives in strengthening connectivity between the two nations. These infrastructure projects offer the potential to reduce transportation costs, increase trade efficiency, and improve access to essential goods and services, particularly for Afghanistan, which has historically been landlocked. By extending CPEC to Afghanistan, the project could provide Afghanistan with access to international markets via Gwadar Port, boosting trade and fostering economic integration between South and Central Asia. Additionally, the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway would link Central Asia with South Asia, creating new economic opportunities and positioning Afghanistan as a critical transit hub for regional trade.

Furthermore, the TAPI pipeline is not just an energy project but also a symbol of regional cooperation. It offers Afghanistan the opportunity to generate revenue through transit fees, while simultaneously addressing Pakistan's energy shortages. This project underscores how regional connectivity projects can serve as tools of mutual benefit, fostering both economic collaboration and stability.

Despite the numerous opportunities, several challenges must be addressed for these initiatives to succeed. Security concerns remain a significant obstacle, particularly in Afghanistan, where ongoing conflict and the presence of insurgent groups threaten the safety and feasibility of infrastructure projects. However, these challenges also present an opportunity for greater regional security cooperation. Through joint efforts, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other regional stakeholders can work together to ensure the protection of these vital infrastructure projects, reducing the risks that come with them.

Political tensions also pose a challenge, especially given the historical mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, by focusing on shared economic interests, both countries can begin to overcome their political differences. Regional connectivity projects offer a neutral ground for collaboration that can build trust and foster a culture of cooperation. Diplomatic engagement and confidence-building measures will be essential in mitigating political risks and ensuring the smooth implementation of these initiatives.

Lastly, the underdeveloped infrastructure in both countries presents a major hurdle to regional connectivity. Afghanistan, in particular, requires substantial investment in its transportation and energy infrastructure to fully benefit from these projects. Pakistan, while more developed, also needs to modernize its regional infrastructure to facilitate trade and enhance connectivity. Continued investment from both governments and international stakeholders will be critical in overcoming these infrastructural limitations.

In conclusion, regional connectivity offers a promising pathway to transforming the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship from one of tension and mistrust to one of mutual benefit and prosperity. By focusing on infrastructure development, fostering economic interdependence, and prioritizing security and political cooperation, both countries can create a stable, prosperous, and integrated region. The successful implementation of key initiatives like CPEC, the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway, and the TAPI pipeline could not only improve the bilateral relationship but also contribute to broader regional stability, making Pakistan and Afghanistan key players in the economic integration of Central and South Asia. The road to achieving this vision, however, will require sustained diplomatic efforts, mutual commitment to cooperation, and overcoming the political and security challenges that have hindered progress in the past.

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