

REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY PROJECTS IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract: *This research work focusses on the regional connectivity projects between Central Asia and Pakistan through Afghanistan. It discusses Vision Central Asia Policy, Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia Corridor. The research paper also analyzed those ground that leads to the delaying of Central Asian Region Economic Cooperation corridors which will connect Central Asia with Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. Moreover, the researcher also discusses Trans-Afghan Railways and hurdles prevails in its extension to Pakistan. It also discusses the China-Afghanistan Economic Corridor (CAEC). It discusses Asian Highway (AH) 7, Khyber Pass Economic Corridor (KPEC), Pakistan-Tajikistan Highway, Wakhan Corridor, Pakistan Uzbekistan Highway, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas pipeline project, Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000). This research study also discusses prospects of regional connectivity. The qualitative methodology has been adopted for the conduction of this research work and secondary sources are being utilized. These regional connectivity projects are very essential for the economic development of Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, terrorism prevails in both countries that makes regional connectivity between Central Asia and Pakistan a nightmare. Therefore, the international communities must have to show efforts in reducing terrorism in Pakistan. Once the terrorism in Pakistan reduced, the regional connectivity projects will become functional which will boost the economy of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.*

Keywords: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, terrorism, TAPI

INTRODUCTION

The countries are dependent on each other due to the convergence of interests in terms of energy, trade, transportation, and culture. This convergence of interest leads to regional connectivity for transporting energy, trade and culture from one country to another country and from one region to another region. These regions and countries are in close proximity with each other. In this context, Afghanistan is in close proximity with Pakistan and the CAR and therefore, plays a central role in regional connectivity. This regional connectivity through Afghanistan gives transit routes to the Central Asian Region/Republics (CAR) for access to the Arabian Sea. The CAR is a landlocked region but intercontinentally connects Europe with South Asia, East Asia, Russia, China, and Pakistan. In this context, Gwadar port is significant for the CAR trade with foreign countries. Moreover, Gwadar is also in close proximity to the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. To connect the CAR with Gwadar, taking Afghanistan into confidence is very essential. In this context Afghanistan is very important for connecting the energy-starved region, the South Asian Region (SAR) with the energy-rich region, the CAR (Memon, 2022).

The CAR is dependent on Russia in all aspects. To reduce this dependency, the CAR wants to begin trade with China, India, and Pakistan. Afghanistan is very essential for the CAR-SAR trade as well as for the utilization of the Gwadar port. Afghanistan and Tajikistan signed a trade transit agreement to facilitate trade between Tajikistan-Afghanistan and Pakistan. The regional connectivity is beneficial for Afghanistan and Pakistan, as this will generate trans-regional employment opportunities. The example of the regional connectivity is the Delaram-Zaranj Highway. India initiated the construction of a highway to connect the CAR with Iran and facilitate its trade with the CAR through Afghanistan (Ali, 2015).

In the context of regional connectivity, it is important to discuss India-CAR trade. The India-CAR trade volume is \$2 billion. Important imports of India from Central Asia are the precious stones, chemicals, iron and steel, machinery, mineral oil, copper goods, plastic goods, wool, and leather. India exports coffee, tea, spices, apparel, pharmaceuticals, and electrical and mechanical equipments. However, the CAR share borders with Russia in the north and China in the east. Therefore, the CAR is dependable for trade on these two countries mostly. The CAR was utilizing the Delaram-Zaranj Highway to expand its trade market to India through import-export to and from India through the Chabahar Port in Iran. To promote the regional connectivity between India and the CAR through Afghanistan, dialogues took place between India, Afghanistan, and the CAR in January 2019. In these dialogues India invited the CAR states to invest in the Chabahar Port of Iran for trade through Afghanistan (Kumar, 2022).

Gwadar is very significant for Pakistan. It will make Pakistan an important state in the international world. Moreover, Gwadar will connect the CAR and Afghanistan with foreign countries for international trade. The trade goods from the CAR and Afghanistan will reach Gwadar via Chaman and Torkham borders and then be transported to foreign countries. To promote the CAR-SAR connectivity, regional infrastructural projects initiated in Afghanistan, including the Trans-Afghan Railway stretching from Uzbekistan to Pakistan's seaports. It is necessary for Central Asia to get access to the SAR through Afghanistan for the expansion of trade and economic opportunities. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, regional connectivity became easier (Akhtar, 2023).

The countries in Afghanistan's proximity are Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Iran, and Pakistan. These countries are also neighboring countries of Afghanistan. Therefore, to connect these countries for trade, Afghanistan plays the role of a transit route (Khan, 2006).

Afghanistan is rich in natural resources. Its worth is \$3 trillion. Afghanistan intends to utilize these resources for its economic development. The economic development and utilization of its own resources and regional connectivity require regional peace and stability. To connect Afghanistan with Europe, the CAR-Turkey and Azerbaijan launched the Lapis Lazuli corridor. Afghanistan is a gateway for CAR trade with other countries through the Gwadar Port facility under the CPEC project. Under the CPEC project, Afghanistan can also utilize the Gwadar port for trade (Omarkhail, 2023).

Among the regional connectivity projects, one of them is the Peshawar-Kabul motorway. This motorway will further be extended to Uzbekistan via Mazar Sharif to connect Pakistan with Uzbekistan. This connectivity project is a part of the CPEC extension to Afghanistan. Another route from this road perhaps given to the Wakhan Corridor for connecting Tajikistan with Pakistan and Afghanistan. These strategies and regional connectivity projects can accomplish the objectives of the regional connectivity under the BRI and CPEC projects (Ebrahim, 2022).

In the early 2000s, a Quadrilateral Trade Transit Agreement (QTTA) was signed between Pakistan, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Under this agreement, regional connectivity energy projects such as TAPI and Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) were initiated. In 2004, QTTA became operational under the umbrella of the Regional Trade Agreements (RTA). After the QTTA, Afghanistan and Pakistan signed the Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade Transit Agreement (APTTA) to facilitate the CAR-SAR connectivity. Under the CPEC, Afghanistan's location plays the role of a

crossroads for the energy transportation. The energy transportation will begin through Afghanistan to Pakistan, India, and China. In this way, Pakistan's energy problem will also be resolved (Khan, 2017).

This research work briefly discusses the regional connectivity projects. It also analyzed the criticism on certain regional connectivity projects and also evaluate the prospects of regional connectivity projects in Afghanistan. For the conduction of the research work, qualitative research methodology has been adopted and secondary sources has been utilized for it.

PROJECTS FOR THE REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

VISION CENTRAL ASIA POLICY

Afghanistan is the gateway for the CAR-SAR connectivity. Pakistan's geostrategic location not only provides the CAR with the shortest access to the Gwadar port but also allows the CAR to export gas and electricity to Pakistan. This will resolve Pakistan's energy problems. Pakistan and the CAR can achieve their mutual objectives by promoting their geo-economic and geo-political engagements. In attaining the regional connectivity objectives, the harmony among the regional stakeholders such as the CAR, Pakistan, and Afghanistan is highly significant. In March 2022, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan and the President of Uzbekistan signed MoUs covering trade, culture, and transportation projects (Riaz, 2023).

In the CAR, Uzbekistan is a gateway to Central Asia. Therefore, to facilitate the trade between the CAR-SAR (Uzbekistan and Pakistan), both countries signed a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA). In the PTA, both countries exempted the trade tariffs on each other. Secondly, the cultures of both countries are mutual. Therefore, to promote the cultures of each other, a Mutual Cooperation Agreement (MCA) was signed between Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Third, to enhance regional connectivity, Pakistan and Uzbekistan signed MoUs on railways for establishing a road-rail network between the two countries, including the Trans-Afghan Railway (Mayar, 2022).

The enhancement of Pak-Uzbek relations is based on five pillars of the foreign policy. The five pillars are political and diplomatic, trade and investment, energy and connectivity, security and defense, and people-to-people contacts. Therefore, the Vision Central Asia Policy is based on these 5 pillars of the foreign policy. However, the MoUs, the two countries signed were based on the strategic relationship, PTA, railway, tourism, radio, and television. The Central Asia Vision Policy also aims to enhance the pace of the socio-economic development of Pakistan. As the CAR and Afghanistan joined the CPEC, therefore, the purposes of all these agreements are not only the enhancement of political and economic relations but also the promotion of the regional connectivity between the two regions under the CPEC. The regional connectivity under the CPEC is very beneficial for the stability and economic development of Afghanistan. To enhance tourism between Pakistan and Uzbekistan, both the countries decided to start direct flights into each other's countries because it is a part of the regional connectivity projects (Observers, 2022).

PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN-CENTRAL ASIA CORRIDOR (PACC)

Afghanistan plays the role of the CAR-Pakistan trade transit corridor. After 2001, the War on Terror began, and the US invaded Afghanistan. The terrorism and militancy began in Afghanistan. This scenario led to the halt of PACC. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan paved the way for establishing this corridor. Consequently, the CASA-1000 and the TAPI projects initiated to export electricity and natural gas to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. The CAR mostly trades with Russia and China. The regional connectivity through Afghanistan will open broad ways of trade opportunities for the CAR. In this way, the CAR will expand its trade to Iran, India, and Pakistan (Carll, 2021).

CONNECTIVITY PLANS OF THE CENTRAL ASIA REGION ECONOMIC COOPERATION

(CAREC)

In 1997, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) established CAREC. The CAREC objective was the enhancement of trade and economic cooperation among the CAR states in particular and its member states in general. The CAREC member states are Pakistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, China, Georgia, and Mongolia (Cooperation). Under the CAREC framework, to promote regional connectivity, 7800 kilometers road and 1800 kilometers railway track will be constructed. In 2017, the CAREC plan was envisaged, which was expected to be completed in 2020 but has not been completed yet. Under the CAREC plan of regional connectivity, there are six corridors to be established (Cooperation, 2024).

Corridor 1	Europe to East Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR))
Corridor 2	Mediterranean to East Asia (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and XUAR)
Corridor 3	Russian Federation to Middle East to South Asia (Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Russia and Iran)
Corridor 4	Russian Federation to East Asia (Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), Mongolia, Russia and XUAR)
Corridor 5	East Asia to Middle East to South Asia (Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan and XUAR)
Corridor 6	Europe to Middle East and South Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan)

(Bank, 2014)

The regional connectivity between Pakistan and the CAR has been mentioned in corridor 5 and corridor 6. Therefore, these two corridors will be discussed.

Under the CAREC, the corridor 5 and corridor 6 routes are based on road, rail, and energy connectivity. Through these corridors, the CAR will gain access to Pakistan through Afghanistan. At first, the CAREC will enter into Peshawar via Torkham. From Peshawar, the corridors will then give access for the CAR to Karachi and Gwadar on one hand and then to Lahore on the other hand. This corridor will be further extended to India through Wagah Border in Lahore. From India, the corridor will be extended to Bangladesh in the east and to Bhutan and Nepal in the north. The objectives of these corridors will be accomplished once Pakistan provide access to India for trade with Afghanistan and the CAR. The CAREC corridors can utilize Iran's Chabahar Port and can trade with India under the agreement signed between India, Iran, and Afghanistan (Sabu, 2021).

Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are the members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). For trade between India-CAR and Afghanistan, Pakistan has to provide a trade transit route to India. Moreover, Pakistan and India are the major member states of the SAARC organization; therefore, Pakistan's access to India for trade with the CAR and Afghanistan will be a step for the promotion of the CAR-SAR connectivity. This strategy will also promote the intra-regional connectivity among the SAARC members and the inter-regional connectivity between the CAR and the SAR.

TRANS-AFGHAN RAILWAY

In February 2021, the Trans-Afghan Railway project initiated. It has been named as the *Project of the Century*. This is a regional connectivity project. It will connect Pakistan with Uzbekistan through railway (Szumski, 2022). Afghanistan is very significant for the CAR-SAR connectivity. The regional stakeholders decided to construct the Trans-Afghan Railway. This railway project will connect Central Asia with Gwadar, Bin Qasim and Karachi Ports in Balochistan and Sindh Provinces, respectively. The Trans-Afghan Railway will facilitate the CAR-Pakistan trade as well as the CAR trade with other countries through the Gwadar Port. In 2011, Uzbekistan constructed a 75-kilometer railway track from Termez to Mazar Sharif. The starting point of the railway track is Termez in Uzbekistan, passing through Mazar Sharif, Baghlan and Bamiyan Provinces; it will then reach Kabul in Afghanistan and to Peshawar through Torkham and Landi Kotal in Pakistan. The railway cargo will be shifted from the Trans-Afghan Railway to Pakistan Railway (Mayar, 2022).

The railway track is 783 kilometers long. There are 8 tunnels, and its length is approximately 148 kilometers. The shortest route to Kabul was from Aybak city through Salang Pass. However, this route was abandoned because Salang Pass is vulnerable to heavy snowfall and avalanches. Therefore, the route diverted from Salang Pass to Baghlan and Bamiyan Provinces (Tribune, 2023).

The cargo reaching Uzbekistan is taking 35 days, which is a time-consuming trade network. This railway track will reduce the trade transit time from 35 to 3-5 days. This project can perhaps face financial challenges. The Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Development Finance Corporation (IDFC), World Bank (WB), and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) will provide financial assistance for the construction of the Trans-Afghan Railway. These financial institutions will provide \$4.8 billion for the initiation of the project of the railway track from Mazar Sharif-Torkham-Peshawar. However, the stakeholders are anticipating the security threats from the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) because it is hostile towards the Afghan Taliban. In this situation, Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan has assured the security for this project. Furthermore, the delay in the completion of the project may occur because the track gauge is to be changed from 1525 millimeters to 1620 millimeters (Asefi, 2022).

Kazakhstan also showed its interest in joining the Trans-Afghan Railway. It will also facilitate Kazakhstan trade with other countries through Gwadar and Karachi ports in Pakistan (Briefing, 2022). On 24th April 2024, the Deputy Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, Serik Zhumangarin, visited Afghanistan. In this visit, he declared that Kazakhstan is ready to join the Trans-Afghan Railway. They expressed that Kazakhstan will participate in the construction of the Termez-Mazar Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar and Herat-Kandahar-Spin Boldak railways. Kazakhstan will supply railway track parts and other equipments (Sakenova, 2024). In April 2025, the Kazakh Deputy Prime Minister visited Afghanistan and expressed that Kazakhstan will invest \$500 million. This amount will be spent on the Torghundi-Herat Railway portion. The length of this portion is 113 kilometers. However, this portion of the Trans-Afghan Railway is also linked with the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) (Umarova, 2025). Moreover, in the 2024 Joint Working Group (JWG) meeting in Termez, a roadmap designed for developing a multimodal transport corridor starting from Belarus-Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan and Pakistan. In late 2024, Pakistan signed MoUs to extend the route of the international corridor to the Indian Ocean. In February 2025, Uzbekistan expressed that the construction on the railway track will start in this year. The railway will also be extended to Russia and Iran as well. In this way, Russia will also get access to the Indian Ocean markets for the international trade (Atayev, 2025).

The main hurdle in the Trans-Afghan Railways is the criticism of the western countries on Uzbekistan for establishing diplomatic and trade relations with the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan. The cause of this criticism is human rights and women's rights issues in Afghanistan (Zhao, 2022). The United States and European countries are making the CAR-SAR-Afghanistan unstable, attempting to forestall the expansion of the regional trade and economic cooperation. These states are also the rivals of Russia.

The inclusion of Russia will become another motive for the United States and the European countries to create an unstable situation in the region to halt or conspire against the Trans-Afghan railway project.

CHINA-AFGHANISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (CAEC)

In the consequence of utilizing Afghanistan's strategic position, the CPEC route to Afghanistan has been described. The city of Urumqi is the starting point of the CPEC route, which extends to China National Highway 314 (CNH 314). Then it enters into GB and the same highway, then called the KKH. The KKH endpoint is Hasanabdal in the Punjab Province of Pakistan. After Hasanabdal, it merges with the Peshawar-Islamabad Motorway (M-1). On reaching Peshawar, the N-5 route named the Grand Trunk Road (GT Road) starts, on which the trade goods will reach the Torkham Border. Through Torkham, the cargo will reach Kabul via NH-08. The Great Asian Highway (AH-1) will contribute in connecting Peshawar with Kabul through Jalalabad. On reaching Kabul, the first National Highway (NH-0101) will start from Kabul and will end in Kandahar. This highway will be the extension of the Peshawar-Jalalabad-Kabul Highway. This highway in Kandahar will then turn to the Spin Boldak-Chaman border and will connect Balochistan via Kandahar. In Kandahar, National Highway (NH-0102) will start from Kandahar and will end in Delaram. The same highway will be extended to Zaranj, which will be called the Delaram-Zaranj Highway. India constructed this highway. This highway is called NH-49 and is a part of the AH-71. This highway will then enter into the Zahedan area of the Iranian Sistan-Baluchistan Province. There will be AH-1: NH63 Highway, called the Herat-Islam Qala Highway, which will enter into the Central Khorasan Province of Iran. This road will pass from Mashhad through the Islam Qila-Taybad border and will finally reach the Chabahar Port of Iran. In Herat, within Afghanistan, a third highway will be emerged called NH-0103, which will connect Herat with Mazar-Sharif. At last, the road from Mazar Sharif will start and will end in Kabul, and this Mazar Sharif-Kabul Highway will be called NH-0104 (Kumar, 2024).

ASIAN HIGHWAY-7 (AH-7)

The AH-7 regional connectivity project will start from Yekaterinburg city of Russia. This highway will link Russia with the CAR through Uzbekistan and Afghanistan it will reach to the ports of the Arabian Sea, particularly Karachi and Gwadar. There are two routes that will link Russia and Uzbekistan with Gwadar and Karachi. One route will be Kabul-Jalalabad-Peshawar. The second route will be Kabul-Kandahar-Chaman (Khan, 2022).

KHYBER PASS ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (KPEC)

In CAREC corridor 5 and corridor 6, the Peshawar-Torkham-Kabul route is on the Khyber Pass. In this scenario, the KPEC project will be initiated. In this project, a 4-lane-wide and 48-kilometer-long highway will be constructed that will connect Peshawar with Afghanistan. The KPEC will provide the shortest route to the CAR for trade through Gwadar Port. The KPEC will reduce transit time of CAR-SAR trade. The project will be initiated through financial assistance from the WB. The WB provided \$406.6 million in December 2019 (Affairs, 2019).

The KPEC will start from Dushanbe and will end in Karachi. However, the road will pass from Peshawar. This corridor will have 22 bridges, 139 culverts, and 2 major interchanges. The project is facing difficulties due to the delay in the initiation of the project and the devaluation of the Pakistani rupee. The devaluation of the Pakistani rupee affects the trade and cost of the economic project with other countries. The Government of Pakistan will provide \$22.15 million for this project (Bank, 2019).

The District Khyber of the Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa will get benefits from this project because the KPEC corridor passes through their areas. The KPEC will also give an infrastructural model to District Khyber. The Khyber District will become an urban center for the erstwhile FATA region because the marble, packaging, transport, and freight industries will become operational in District Khyber, which will create 60000-100000 job opportunities for the citizens of the Khyber District. There

are other sections of the KPEC to connect Pakistan and Afghanistan with Central Asia, and their details are given below in the table:

Link	Section	Cost IN MILLIONS (\$)	Financing Source	Current Status
Tajikistan-Afghanistan	Dushanbe-Shir Khan Bandar	150	World Bank	Under Preparation
Afghanistan	Baghlan-Bamyan, Salang Road and Tunnel	136	World Bank	Under Construction
Afghanistan-Pakistan	Kabul-Jalalabad	140	Asian Development Bank	Under Construction
	Jalalabad-Torkham	125	Government of Pakistan	Completed
	Torkham Border Transit	The upgradation of the cross-border infrastructure to be financed by Asian Development Bank		
Pakistan	Peshawar-Torkham (KPEC)	402.75	World Bank	The project has been approved by Executive Committee of National Economic Council

(Bank W. , 2019)

The corridor will enhance Pak-Afghan relations. It will revive the ancient Silk Road, as Central Asian Republics (CARs) used the Khyber Pass for trade with South Asia during the ancient and medieval times. Under the KPEC project, 446 processing units of the marble industry will be established. The horticulture will be enhanced. Under the KPEC, the Trans-Pakistan Expressway System will be developed. The highway will be further extended to the Peshawar-Islamabad motorway and the Lahore-Karachi motorway (Rehman, 2021).

On 11th October 2024, the Inspection Panel of the World Bank did an investigation of 448 residents of the areas of the KPEC route. This investigation revealed that the road alignment with land will displace the people of the concerned areas. They will lose their livelihoods. This may lead to internal tensions, conflicts, and violence in the concerned areas. Moreover, in those areas where the KPEC road and highway will be built will change the cultural practices there. Besides, the people of the concerned areas are also uninformed regarding the KPEC and not aware of the economic benefits of the KPEC (Panel, 2024).

PAKISTAN-TAJIKISTAN HIGHWAY

In the early 2000s, the idea of Pakistan-Tajikistan connectivity evolved. The route of this corridor will be Peshawar-Torkham-Kabul-Badakhshan and the Oxus River. The other routes for connecting Pakistan with Tajikistan are:

- Alma-Franze-Naryan-Kashgar-Khunjerab-Gilgit-Islamabad-Karachi (3708 kilometer)
- Dushanbe-Garam Chashma (Chitral)-Eshkashem-Islamabad- Karachi (2022 kilometer)

It was intended that the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan should be utilized. Afghanistan criticized this

strategy because it could deprive other regions of Afghanistan from the benefits of the regional connectivity with the CAR. Besides, this setback would have reduced Pakistan-Tajikistan trade-transit time (Yasmeen, 2003).

The third route for Pakistan-CAR connectivity under the CPEC project is the Gwadar-Peshawar-Kabul-Kunduz and Dushanbe. The fourth route is the Khunjerab-Kalasu-Murghab, and then the fifth route is the Chitral-Eshkashem and Dushanbe. In 2015, Pakistan signed agreements with the CAR states to start the construction of the highway on the proposed routes. However, the insecure situation in Afghanistan became a hurdle, and the construction on the project was not initiated (Rauf, 2021)

In the CAR-SAR regional connectivity, Afghanistan plays a significant role. Afghanistan provides a trade and transit route for the CAR-SAR connectivity. The infrastructure, such as road and rail link, passes from Afghanistan to get them access to Gwadar Port in Pakistan. There are three routes for CAR-Pakistan connectivity:

- Salang Pass-Kabul-Peshawar-Karachi and Gwadar.
- Tajikistan-Badakhshan-Peshawar-Karachi and Gwadar.
- Kashgar-Gilgit-Karachi and Gwadar.

The aim of the CPEC is to make Pakistan a regional hub for the trade and energy transportation. Consequently, Pakistan will become economically developed. Its dependence on Western countries will be reduced (Khan, 2016).

WAKHAN CORRIDOR

The Wakhan Corridor is situated in the Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan. It is 300 kilometers long and 16-70 kilometers wide. The corridor connects Tajikistan in the north, China in the northeast, and Pakistan in the east. It is a part of the Hindukush Mountain Ranges. The Wakhan Corridor has the foremost significance for the CAR-Pakistan connectivity because of its proximity to China, Pakistan, and the CAR (Ahmad, 2023). The utilization of the Wakhan Corridor requires the construction of 20 kilometers highway. The construction of the highway on the Wakhan Corridor will connect the CAR and Pakistan. Its utilization will reduce trade-transit time (Javed, 2018). However, the former Afghan Chief of Staff Abdul Karim Khurram during the reign of the then-President Hamid Karzai criticized the utilization of the Wakhan Corridor. He had a view that utilization of the Wakhan Corridor will denigrate the importance of the other regions of Afghanistan. In 2022, Information Minister of Afghanistan Zabihullah Mujahid expressed that no discussion took place on the utilization of the Wakhan Corridor. Besides, the terrain of the Wakhan Corridor is also not formidable for the construction of the highway. However, the terrorism that prevailed in Afghanistan was a hurdle in the utilization of the Wakhan Corridor (Sail, 2022).

The discussion is in the process between Chinese and Afghan authorities on the utilization of the Wakhan Corridor for the CAR-Pakistan connectivity. The utilization of the corridor will provide the shortest access for the road and rail connectivity between the CAR and Pakistan. However, its utilization will give a huge setback to India because this will attenuate Indian influence in the CAR. Moreover, the Indian struggle to isolate Pakistan in the region will also be damaged. Furthermore, the Wakhan Corridor will enhance Pakistan's strategic position in the CAR because it will directly and shortly access the Central Asian States. Through the Wakhan Corridor, the Qala Panja, Mintaka, and Wakhjir passes will be linked with Gilgit Baltistan (Pakistan), Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. There are two bridges that connects Wakhan with the KKH and the Diamer and Ghizer Districts of GB. These bridges are Darel and Tangir (Hafiz, 2024). Besides Pakistan, China is currently utilizing the Wakhan Corridor; the highway construction of 49 kilometers has been completed (Turgunbaeva, 2024). The Wakhan Corridor is also vulnerable to the armed extremist groups like ISKP, National Resistance Force (NRF), TTP, Islamic Movement of Turkestan (IMT), Ansarullah, Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT),

and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (Amir, 2023).

The Wakhan Corridor is very significant for the CAR-Pakistan connectivity. The corridor can be utilized for getting a short access to Tajikistan in particular. The corridor will have no effect on time in Pakistan-Uzbekistan connectivity. To connect Pakistan and Uzbekistan, the Peshawar-Kabul-Mazar Sharif route is better and more effective. However, Pakistan-Tajikistan connectivity through Kabul will be costly and time-consuming. Moreover, Afghanistan has no interest in connecting Pakistan and Tajikistan through the Wakhan Corridor. If the corridor is utilized, the Badakhshan Province will take huge benefits from this initiative. The Pakistani-made goods will be transported to Afghanistan and Tajikistan through this corridor. The utilization of the corridor will provide numerous benefits to the people of Badakhshan.

PAKISTAN-UZBEKISTAN HIGHWAY

The geographical location of Afghanistan is on the verge of Pakistan in the east and the CAR in the north and in the west. Therefore, Afghanistan is the key route for Pakistan-Central Asia regional connectivity. The friendly relations with Afghanistan are the linchpin for the regional connectivity. There are seven routes for the regional connectivity between the CAR and Pakistan through Afghanistan:

- Termez-Kabul-Torkham-Peshawar-Karachi via N-5 Highway (3209 kilometer).
- Termez-Kabul-Torkham-Peshawar-Karachi via Indus Highway (2852 kilometer).
- Termez-Mazar Sharif-Herat-Kandahar-Chaman-Khuzdar-Karachi (2983 kilometer).
- Termez-Herat-Kandahar-Chaman-Khuzdar-Turbat-Gwadar (3276 kilometer).
- Termez-Kabul-Torkham-Islamabad-Karachi.
- Termez-Mazar Sharif-Herat-Kandahar-Chaman-Quetta-Karachi/Gwadar (3512 kilometer).
- Termez-Kabul-Peshawar-Lahore-Hyderabad-Karachi (3209 kilometer) (Khan, 2016).

Iran-Afghanistan-Tajikistan Trilateral Transit Agreement

The geographical location of Afghanistan is connecting all the regions of the Asian continent. From a regional connectivity perspective, Afghanistan is not only important for Pakistan but also for Iran. Like Pakistan, Iran also wanted access to Central Asia. To serve this purpose, on 18th June 2003, the Iran-Afghanistan-Tajikistan Trilateral Transit Agreement (IATTTA) was signed. According to this agreement, a trade and transit corridor will be established from Iran to Central Asia through Afghanistan. Its infrastructure will be based on highway and railway. Iran will utilize the corridor for connecting with other countries of the CAR also. In this way, Iran will likely reduce Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan (Khan, 2004).

TURKMENISTAN-AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN-INDIA (TAPI) GAS PIPELINE

In 1994, Birdas Argentinean Corporation (BAC) got access to the Yashlar gas and Keimir oil fields in Turkmenistan. Consequently, from these gas and oil fields, Gazprom pipeline construction began. The pipeline will have to supply the natural gas from these natural gas and oil fields to Russia. The Chairman of the BAC suggested laying the Trans-Afghan Gas Pipeline for the exportation of these gas reserves to the SAR countries of Pakistan and India. The Afghan stakeholders accepted the agreement in 1996. Resultantly, in 2002, the TAP gas pipeline project was signed between Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. After the inclusion of India in 2006, the agreement was renegotiated and became the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline Project. The distance from the Yashlar Gas fields to Pakistan is 1400 kilometers. Under this project, energy will be imported from the energy-rich region to the energy-deficit region. The quantity of natural gas export will be 20 billion cubic

meters. According to the proposed plan, it was decided that the project will be completed by 2011. The TAPI would become operational in 2011-12. In this context, Afghanistan is not only becoming a trade transit corridor but also an energy corridor (Khan, 2009).

From 2001 to 2012, the US indulged in Afghanistan. Then from 2012 to 2021, the US stayed in Afghanistan under the shadow of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). These were the reasons due to which TAPI became a dream in spite of US favor for the project. This situation prevented the materialization of the TAPI gas pipeline project (Khan, 2013).

The utilization of the Turkmenistan natural gas reserves is a desire of every region of Asia. This desire leads to pipeline politics, which is the aim of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East to utilize the Turkmenistan natural gas reserves. The natural gas reserves would be exported to CAR in the North and Northeast, to SAR countries (India and Pakistan) in the East under the TAPI gas pipeline agreement, and to the Middle East in the South. In 1997, Iran and Turkmenistan completed the construction of the pipeline. Regarding Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, the security situation in these countries became an impediment in the construction of the pipeline, and the project has not been materialized. Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India have not started construction of the pipeline yet. This energy project can play a crucial role in the promotion and development of the regional connectivity in the form of energy transportation between the CAR-SAR (Khan, 2004). The TAPI route is from Daulatabad-Herat-Kandahar in Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, Quetta and Multan in Pakistan and Faizabad in India. The length of the pipeline will be 1680 kilometers (Khan, 2016).

In December 2024, the spokesperson of the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan announced that the construction work on the TAPI in Afghanistan will start soon. The construction of a gas pipeline will enhance the economic potential of Afghanistan. Moreover, Federal Minister for Petroleum Dr. Musadik Malik and Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs Rashid Meredov declared the reaffirmation to expedite the progress of the TAPI gas pipeline project. Besides, Russia is also interested in importing the natural gas from the Daulatabad natural gas reserves to their country via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Afzal, 2024). The gas pipeline in Turkmenistan is completed. In Afghanistan, the construction of the pipeline has been completed up to 3 kilometers. However, the President of Turkmenistan, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, told his officials to boost up the construction work on the gas pipeline (Haider, 2025). On 8th April 2025, the Ambassador of Kazakhstan, in a meeting with Pakistan's Federal Minister of Science and Technology Khalid Hussain Magsi, expressed that Kazakhstan will also join the TAPI gas pipeline project (Tribune, 2025). The willingness of Kazakhstan to join the TAPI is a step towards regional integration. Furthermore, it is a step that, once the gas pipeline construction is completed in Kazakhstan, Russia will ultimately link its gas pipeline with Kazakhstan's gas pipeline, which is linked with TAPI.

CENTRAL ASIA-SOUTH ASIA (CASA-1000)

Pakistan is facing an electricity shortage. In this situation, Pakistan has to import electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan through local thermal stations. This electricity supply will lead the concerned countries to form a united energy system to facilitate Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan electrical power supply (Khan, 2004). In this context, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have the potential to produce 40000 MW and 26000 MW of electricity, respectively. Kyrgyzstan will export/supply 1000 MW through Tajikistan and Afghanistan to Peshawar. The transmission line will be stretched from Dakta in Kyrgyzstan and will end in Khozdent in Tajikistan. The length of this part of the transmission line will be 450 kilometers. In Tajikistan, a 117-kilometer transmission line will be stretched; in Afghanistan, a 526-kilometer line; and in Pakistan, a 71-kilometer line will be stretched to transmit the electricity from Kyrgyzstan to Pakistan. In 2007, the CASA agreement was signed. In this project, Afghanistan invested \$300 million, Tajikistan invested \$270 million, Kyrgyzstan invested \$200 million, and Pakistan also invested \$200 million (Khan, 2016). In 2022, the construction of CASA-1000 came to a halt due to the

deteriorated situation in Afghanistan. However, the construction on CASA will be resumed soon (Ahmed, 2024). In April 2024, Afghan Energy and Water Minister Matiullah Abid declared that the CASA-1000 project will become operational by 2026. The transit fees will be \$75 million, which Afghanistan will charge. The CASA-1000 project will pass through Kunduz, Panjshir, Kapisa, Kabul, Laghman, and Nangarhar (Hakimi, 2024).

PROSPECTS OF REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

There are numerous prospects of the CAR-SAR regional connectivity in general and the CAR-Pakistan connectivity in particular. The Trans-Afghan Railway will start from Termez and will end in Peshawar through Afghanistan is very essential for trade and transit between the CAR and Pakistan. The project is worth \$4.5 billion. The Trans-Afghan Railway will enhance the regional connectivity between the CAR and SAR. In Uzbekistan, the urban-rural gap will be declined, which will prosper the domestic situation. The regional connectivity will attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). This will also increase Pak-Uzbek trade volume up to \$1 billion (Observer, 2022). Under the regional connectivity through different sources of transportation like road, railway, energy, trade, and ports, the economic production and growth will be enhanced between the CAR-SAR countries. The regional connectivity infrastructures will become a source of peace and prosperity for Afghanistan (Times, 2022).

In the CPEC project, Pakistan desires to include Afghanistan. In the 3rd Joint Working Group on International Cooperation and Coordination (JWG-ICC), Pakistan invited Afghanistan to join the CPEC. Afghanistan's inclusion in the CPEC will enhance its economic situation. CPEC will boost Afghan exports in the international market. In the process of the regional connectivity, Pakistan and Afghanistan will provide benefits to each other. Moreover, the US and the Western countries do not recognize the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan; the former frozen their assets, and this is making the Afghan economy a fragile one. Under these circumstances, the regional connectivity will strengthen the Afghan economy (Times, 2022). In the process and progress of the regional connectivity, intra-regional and inter-regional trade linkages will be established. These linkages among regions will open avenues of opportunities for the people of Afghanistan in the form of management and labor force that will be involved in the regional connectivity projects in Afghanistan. In the shadow of the CPEC, the CAR will get access to Gwadar (Munir, 2018)..

Afghanistan will be the direct beneficiary of the regional connectivity because all the routes connecting the CAR passes through Afghanistan. To regionally connect the CAR-SAR and Pakistan, the stability and viability must be ensured. The regional connectivity will increase the CAR-SAR trade volume from 0.2% to 4.0%. Pakistan must remove its trade barriers and visa restrictions on Afghanistan to ensure its political will for the CAR-SAR connectivity. Until the removal of the trade barriers and visa restrictions, the aim of regional connectivity will not be ensured (Assanbayev, 2023).

The CAR-SAR connectivity has numerous prospects. Firstly, this regional connectivity process will promote regional harmony between the CAR and SAR. The CAR-SAR trade will be enhanced. The CAR dependence on Russia in trade will be reduced. This regional connectivity will open wide avenues of trade for the CAR. The CAR will introduce itself in the eastern and western parts of the world, through which it will expand its trade. Secondly, Afghanistan's economy will be enhanced. The people of Afghanistan will be alleviated from poverty. The war-ravaged country will become economically enhance, and infrastructural development will begin in Afghanistan. There will be numerous industries open under the regional connectivity, and Afghan labor will be employed in these industries. The industrial development in Afghanistan will increase the production from raw material. The produced goods can be exported to China, CAR, Pakistan, and Iran and to other countries through sea and land routes. Thirdly, the CAR-Pakistan trade will initiate, and this trade process can be further extended to Europe via CAR. The Europe-Pakistan connectivity will be another venue in the process of the regional connectivity. With this regional connectivity process under the CPEC, it will create a venue for Pakistan-Europe trade and connectivity. This will open another venue of discussion in the inter-regional

connectivity. This will ultimately turn into the continental connectivity.

CONCLUSION

The regional connectivity projects have the significance for the trade between the CAR and Afghanistan with Pakistan and the other parts of the world through Gwadar port. The CAR and Afghanistan are the landlocked region and the country, respectively. The CAR is mostly dependent on Russia in trade. However, the CAR dependency on Russia will be reduced. Moreover, these regional connectivity projects will facilitate the transportation of trade goods between the CAR and Afghanistan.

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