



## **Pakistan's Evolving Relations with Central Asia: A Case Study of Connectivity Projects**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyses Pakistan's evolving relations with Central Asia, using connectivity as a factor of analysis to explore projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) within the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework. These projects are the main focal points of the regional economic and geopolitical developments plan and to enhance the trade and energy cooperation along with economic capability of Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs). As with most development projects in these regions, these projects hold the potential for tremendous development impact, however, are not without substantial challenges such as political instability and security threats, development of infrastructure. Consequently, the multiple connectivity initiatives are examined from an economic, political and security perspective through this qualitative research approach. Since the last decade or so, there is quite a paradigm shift which indicates that, despite a relative increase in trade volumes and investments, geopolitical barriers and perceived security threats, for instance in Afghanistan, continue to hamper regional integration. To overcome these challenges, the article calls for stepped up multilateralism, infrastructure spending and public-private partnerships (PPPs). Furthermore, connectivity projects point out the opportunities for the transformation of the region's infrastructure however, their implementation will be difficult unless a number of these challenges are addressed through continued regional cooperation and solid investments in both connection and security.

**Keywords:** Connectivity projects, CPEC, Central Asia

### **Introduction**

The idea of regional integration has become one of the most prominent ideas in economic and political world development during the 21st century. As such, in the region of South and Central Asia, it is accepted as a strategic means for promoting the development of economic relationships, for increasing trade, for developing infrastructure, and for securing energy needs. Pakistan as a whole plays an important link between the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and

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international markets especially those in South Asia, Middle East and other continents. The extent of this connectivity is mainly implemented through numerous actions, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – which forms part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) plan. These connectivity projects aim at filling infrastructure and economic deficiencies that have limited Central Asia's integration into world economy (Rubab, Ali, & Rana, 2022). There have also been few economic ties between South and Central Asia in the past because political tensions, inadequate transport connectivity systems and the lack of the routes have hampered economic relations between both regions. Central Asia is primarily a landlocked region and as such possesses a number of issues connected with the access to international markets. Hence, the Central Asian countries including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan have been actively searching for ways to inevitably diversify their outlet/access routes (Saqib, & Naazer, 2023).

Likewise, Pakistan that has domestic problems and regional insecurity that slowed down its economic growth considers CAs as necessary for its own economic stability and growth. To mitigate these challenges, and promote a stronger". To enhance overall regional integration, it is necessary to rely on the development of stable and efficient trade connections and energy supply routes (Contessi, 2016; Khalid, & Afridi, 2016). Connectivity projects in the region are not only a source of economic development but also a geopolitical value. Since the early twentieth century there seems a rising concern among the two regions Pakistan and Central Asia about the transportation and energy corridors. As a transit country for the Central Asian states' hydrocarbon and other products to markets in South and South East Asia, Pakistan has vast opportunities as a transit country for the oil and gas and other products to the world markets through the Arabian Sea (Rauf, 2021). This connectivity drive is also anchored on an expansion of infrastructure that can support trade, including roads, pipeline systems, and rail transport. The pioneer of such framework is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which serves to capture this vision. The \$64 billion CPEC project involves a 3,000 km long route from the Gwadar Port in Pakistan up to the Xinjiang region in China and helps the Central Asian countries to export their products at a short and cheaper route to Pakistan with a deep sea port (Rauf, 2021; Ahmad, Farooq, & Khattak, 2024). The fact is that this path avoids predefined channels that pass through Russia and Iran, where a fairly unstable period within the political and economic leagues has been observed.

The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline projects are also other evidence that can establish the increasing centrality of energy link between Pakistan and Central Asia. TAPI, the pipeline project designed to deliver natural gas from Turkmenistan to India through Afghanistan and Pakistan is an example of infrastructure projects that can decrease energy reliance at the same time enhancing interdependent economy (Rajpoot, & Naeem, 2020). These projects which are aimed to cater for immediate energy needs, are too seen as mechanism of creating sustainable economic security and furthering the cause of peace and unity in the region (Rauf, 2021; Ali et al., 2021). TAPI pipeline has particularly strategic solutions to energy security

problems that reallocates the region, particularly Pakistan, which suffers from energy crises and dependency on fossil fuel imports (Huda, & Ali, 2017). However, having said this, it is important to assert that while such connectivity projects bear the potential to change the destiny of the continent, the availability of such facility is still a long way off from being a reality as envisaged. Main issues that have made it difficult to implement them include; high political risks, insecurity and lacking infrastructure. For example, the situation in Afghanistan continues to be one of the biggest dangers to the projects meant to improve connectivity in the region. The Taliban's return of power in Afghanistan is an issue of concern to the safe transportation of goods, and the effects of continuing conflicts and security threats may lead to turbulence in the whole sphere of Central Asia (Rauf, 2021; Aben, 2019). However, matters concerning the sovereignty affect regional integration especially the contentious boundary disputes between India and Pakistan which has made it difficult to forge closer Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) linkages between the South Asian and Central Asian regions (Khan et al., 2007; Paul, 2020).

There are concerns of debt sickness, particularly BRI that has the Chinese dominating the market for credits. Chinese investments in infrastructure development have been considered as a form of economic emancipation; however, critics have suggested that such loans are likely to put Pakistan into what might be called debt hole. Wolf (2020) has expressed negative remarks on the rise of China strategic engagement and have opined that the engagement by China may not only be a commercial strategy but a strategic dominance in the area. Such concerns raise a major issue to the sovereignty of the countries that will undertake BRI projects since such countries may end up being heavily reliant on China's economic or political might (Islam, & Cansu, 2020). The development of regional connectivity infrastructure therefore continues to face crucial infrastructure challenges, most of the countries in the region do not have sufficient financial and technical capabilities to support the development of massive connection infrastructure. However, the problem of skills deficit, lack of technical knowhow and basic infrastructure within many areas in Central Asia remains a major challenge that slows down the rate of project implementation, even with more investments pouring in (Khetran, & Khalid, 2019). Even the member countries like Pakistan also have their set of barriers that include energy crisis, issue of corruption, political instability that impedance the successful manifestation of connectivity objectives. To tackle these, robust institutional setup, well-governed and policy stability focusing on longevity of such projects is imperative (Saqib, & Naazer, 2023).

Consequently, despite the fact that the connectivity projects including CPEC and TAPI are laden with significant potentialities to integrate Central Asia and Pakistan economically, these potentials can be achieved only if appropriate strategies are devised to overcome these problems. Enhancing the regional collaboration, security situation, lack of physical infrastructure and more importantly how these projects will be financially sustainable will go a long way in determining the success of such projects. Such barriers can only be

surmounted in order for the region to realize the economic advantages of integration which in turn will turn South and Central Asia into an ever competitive economic community resilient to the challenges of the world economy (Rauf, 2021; Javaid, & Siraj, 2022). For both Pakistan and all the Central Asian states, regional connectivity is an innovative model offering development, stability, and cooperation. CPEC and TAPI provide new dimensions of economic and political cooperation; however, many challenges existing in the area. Through such connectivity measures, the region can inch towards achieving long term objective of regional integration and development. But the road ahead is full of many problems, political and technical that need to be resolved so that the potential of these connectivity projects could be unleashed (Melnikovová, 2020; Yu, 2023).

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To examine the impact of connectivity projects on Pakistan's relations with Central Asia.
2. To assess the political context of connectivity projects in the region.
3. To investigate the security challenges affecting regional connectivity initiatives.
4. To identify the geopolitical implications of China's involvement in Central Asia.

### **Research Questions**

1. How have connectivity projects, particularly CPEC, impacted economic integration between Pakistan and Central Asia?
2. What are the political context of connectivity initiatives in the region?
3. What security challenges are associated with connectivity projects in the context of instability in Afghanistan and regional terrorism?
4. What are the geopolitical implications of China's role in Central Asia, especially concerning sovereignty and regional security?

### **Literature Review**

Connectivity ventures have been hailed globally as the magnificent systems that can dramatically combine an economy for development besides revolutionizing trading relationships and geopolitics. This idea of economic corridors – connecting distant regions by investments in infrastructure and trade – has been key to the process of drawing landlocked countries including those of the Central Asia into the global economy. To some extent, Uralbayev, and Yermekbayev (2021) pointed out that the creation of such corridors not only focuses on launching commercial roads, but also builds up the base for enduring economic development by turning the initially developing regions into commercial and investment centers. In this regard, China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as well as the other connectivity projects under the framework of the Belt and Road Connectivity have come into the limelight especially in south and central Asia. Such projects can open up the opportunities for regional cooperation and integration for trade and

investment, as well as regional security although these projects are not without their implementation problems.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) adopted by China in 2013 refers to the reconstruction of the old Silk Road, the construction of a new Silk Road economic belt, and new Asian, European, Middle East, and African economic passages. According to Malik (2017), this has been noted as one of the biggest infrastructure projects of the 21st Century, whose goals are to boost the trade relations and political relations and let in capital and labour. Central Asia should be one of the main beneficiaries of BRI since it is predominantly a region of landlocked countries. According to Javaid, Siraj, and Żukowski, (2024) the area's dependence on Russian and Iranian transport routes to international markets lacks flexibility severely constraining the integration of the region into the new trade system, where new, more secure and cheaper alternatives represent the key interest.

CPEC is one of the fundamental parts of the BRI; it links China's Xinjiang with the Pakistan's Gwadar Port and serves a vital channel for the Central Asia, South Asia and world economy. Current scholars such as Yu (2023) correctly pointed out that CPEC is both a game-changer for Pakistan and Central Asia. For Pakistan, PON is expected to increase trade, energy, and infrastructure, as well as for Central Asia it offers a direct access to the Arabian Sea and international trade. Moreover, it was also believed that projects under CPEC is to improve the regional energy connectivity; for instance, the TAPI pipeline project (Melnikovová,, 2020).

Though such initiatives may be developed to support such processes, they are not devoid of any difficulties. However, political instability constitutes one of the greatest challenges to regional integration through connectivity projects because Afghanistan, for example, which serves as a key transit point for many of these projects, is politically unstable. As Uralbayev, and Yermekbayev (2021) also rightly pointed out that ongoing insecurity and internal conflicts in Afghanistan have become the biggest barrier for the implementation of large gestures such as TAPI pipeline and CPEC project. The emergence of the new militant groups like the Taliban remains a great danger to investments and the free movement of commodities. For example, sabotage of pipelines and trading channels by terrorists and cross border tensions between Pakistan & Afghanistan have added to this problem.

Furthermore, opponents of China's Belt and Road Initiative; Rolland, opine that the countries participating in the BRI are becoming increasingly indebted. As these projects suggest a considerable construct of the basic framework of the economy so, they are borrowed funds through Chinese loans and call for worrying debts traps. According to some critics led by Saqib, & Naazer, (2023), while several countries borrowed heavily for their CPEC projects, the probability of debt distress hence geo-financial vulnerability dents the sovereignty of nations like Pakistan by compromising their ability to repay the loans. The vulnerability to the debt trap has been most specifically discussed in the context of Pakistan where public and political discussions remain focused on the BRI's longer term economic impact.

While there are many critiques a similar number of voices made the argument that the BRI's infrastructure projects could serve as the impetus for economic growth and regional security. Rubab, Ali, and Rana, (2022) develop an argument that working on regional infrastructure in line with the BRI will bring rise on economic growth due to enhanced trade and transport costs and rising investment within the sectors of energy, logistics, and telecommunication. In fact Central Asia has been planned to compensate the Energy deficits and connectivity problems with the construction the transport corridors and energy pipelines under CPEC and TAPI. As Khalid, & Afridi (2016) have pointed out, such enhancements should result in increased regional trade that would benefit Central Asian, especially the landlocked, countries by diversifying their economy and expanding their markets.

The energy sector for instance benefits much from increased connectivity in the region. It has recently been discovered that Central Asia has great potential in the resources facet notably oil and natural gas but due to entities being landlocked, they have not been well exploited. Rauf (2021) said not only the TAPI and the Central Asia–China gas pipeline but also other pipeline projects will help Pakistan to reduce energy deficiency but at the same time contributing to the diversification of energy import sources in Central Asian countries. The possibility to export natural gas to Pakistan, India or further can really produce very positive effects on Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan economies.

All the same, thus as much as the region has many economic prospects, the political aspect of the area is still complex. The conflict between India and Pakistan persists; there is competition between China and the Western world systems. Displeasure by India to CPEC because the corridor goes through the Pakistan-controlled portion of the disputed area of Kashmir bears ample evidence of politics that continue to impede regional integration (Rajpoot, & Naeem, 2020). A similar way, the political position to China has elicited mixed feelings where while some countries consider China's infrastructure investments as good for the region, others find the increasing influence of Beijing bad for the region.

Another issue that can have an impact on connectivity success is that the social organization in some of the CAs countries is weak with regard to governance and institutions. The authors of Huda, and Ali (2017) noted that poor governance, institutional vices, and improper management of bureaucratic frameworks may prove to be the albatross in large-scale infrastructure development programs. Moreover, the capability of local governments to administer and superintend over these projects is also limited which makes executing programs such as the CPEC even more challenging. For instance, in Pakistan bureaucratic entanglements and poor coordination between various tiers of government held responsible for some of CPEC's hiccups (Aben, 2019).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is relevant as it offers important details about how connectivity projects, for instance CPEC and TAPI can create economic

interaction between Pakistan and Central Asia. It is suggested that the findings of the research concerning the political, economic, and security aspects of such actions may provide important insights to the policymakers in addressing the problems of the region as well as enhance positive collaboration. In addition, the research examines and discusses the impact of China's rise in the region to reflect the large and expanding literature on regional integration, sovereignty, and stability of the region. The results can also be used to design future strategies to mitigate challenges which may include political instability, security threats and infrastructural development as a way of improving trading, investment and energy exchange in the South and Central Asia towards designing a future of long-term regional economic development.

### **Research Methodology**

Drawing on qualitative research, this study maps the dynamics of Pakistan's changing political and economic relations with Central Asia via connectivity projects. Data from peer reviewed articles, policies, reports from international organizations were used for the study. To that end, a thematic analysis of the study was made to capture patterns and difficulties in connectivity projects. The study focuses on three core dimensions such as; analyzing trade statistics, investment flows, relevant structures and facilities; Looking at the bilateral and multilateral agreements; most importantly, discussing the threats coming from instability and terrorism.

### **Research Analysis and Results**

This section provides the discussion of the study results in light of the chosen qualitative methodological approach that for the purpose of research sought to assess the implications of connectivity projects for Pakistan's relations with Central Asia. The study examines secondary data from policy documents, journal articles, reports of NGOs and international organizations and examines patterns, issues and opportunities with regards to the three sectors of economic effect, political processes, and security aspects. The study therefore reveals both the opportunities and the major challenges in connectivity with emphasis on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which is part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

#### ***Economic Impact: Trade Volumes, Investment Flows, and Infrastructure Developments***

Another reason for connectivity initiatives including CPEC is that they have potential to significantly overhaul the participating countries' economies. As for Pakistan and Central Asia, regional integration is assumed to promote trade, investment and improve infrastructural facilities. While the trade amounts show a slowly increasing tendency, they are much lower than could be expected from optimized transport facilities between Pakistan and the Central Asian countries.

Recent information show a slow but steady rise in the volume of trade activities between Pakistan and Central Asia especially after the beginning of CPEC. As stated by the Saqib, & Naazer, (2023), the bilateral trade between

Pakistan and Central Asia continuously augmented from \$ 2017 to \$2019 and is estimated to be 15% Moreover, the Pakistani exports the largest number of textile products, agriculture products, and drugs. Nevertheless, these volumes remain still marginally below the potential widely estimated by regional professionals. A paper by Javaid, Siraj, and Żukowski, (2024) established that direct connectivity and poor communication infrastructures needed to establish easy end-to-end connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia were partly missing, and inadequate physical connectivity posed a major challenge to trade growth. The development achieved through CPEC relates to enhancing the infrastructure situation that refers road, rail links etc., which are foreseen to decrease the transportation cost, likely to increase bilateral trade in the upcoming years.

Investment flows into Pakistan has also increased because of connectivity through CPEC to cement infrastructure structures, for instance Gwadar Port, road networks, and energy pipeline. Analyzing the various sources from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank etc., considering the aspect of the CPEC Choudhury (2023) revealed how CPEC has attracted over \$25 billion investment from china, of which more than 50% have been committed to the infrastructure development. These investments are projected to give due opportunity to Central Asian states as Gwadar offers them a sea line opportunity through Arabian Sea. The opening up in Central Asia's access to international market could facilitate the export diversification moving away from highly reliance of Exporting to Russian and Iran (Rauf, 2021).

The infrastructural development experienced in the region through the realization of the CPEC project is phenomenal. Projects such as construction of new highways and rail links, development of Gwadar Port is considered part of integration to international markets. As mentioned by Kardon, Kennedy, and Dutton (2020) it is predicted that Gwadar Port will rise as an important commercial center where Central Asia Ministry of Commerce will convey all its Central Asia energy to the global market. This will provide a sound base for trade from Central Asia to the other parts of the world through Pakistan's Northern areas and the Khunjerab pass for transports.

The construction of energy facilities, for example, TAPI pipeline also holds the solution to energy crises' throughout Pakistan and Central Asia. Being the area with enormous reserves of natural gas Central Asia has a history of the inability to export its energy resources mainly because of geographical factors. The TAPI pipeline, planned for Turkmenistan natural gas through Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India is expected to increase energy within the area, as well as mentioned not having to depend on routes different from the ones planned (Rauf, 2021). This energy corridor is crucial to Pakistan, a country suffering from long term energy crisis and therefore in desperate need of new sources of supply.

### ***Political Dynamics: Bilateral and Multilateral Agreements***

Indeed political factors are instrumental in influencing the successes or failure of regional connectivity projects. Pakistan has a connection with the



Central Asia which is affected by political corridors, diplomacy, socio economic ties and understanding, regional and international alliances and commitments, in the light of bilateral and multilateral agreements and other political and economic parameters.

A considerable amount of progress has been noted in the relations between Pakistan and Central Asian nations with reference to agreements focusing on trade, energy and infrastructure. For instance, to boost BRI cooperation in infrastructure development, Pakistan signed series of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and agreements with the Cooperation of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. According to Paul (2020), there is more than one agreement with Pakistan on connectivity with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Also, through the active cooperation in Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), a number of central Asian republics' governments have found ways to communicate actively with Pakistan.

A good example of this emerging bilateral cooperation is the tri-national Afghanistan Pakistan Turkmenistan (APT) road map that aims at connecting Central Asian goods to Arabian Sea passing through Pakistan. The latter will also enhance better political and economic relations among the countries carrying out such projects in enhancing trade routes. Additionally, the presently accomplished projects by the Pakistan Government are in conformity with the SECP Act regarding Regional connectivity with more power, standing and better relations with the vicinity neighborhood.

These include; Quadrilateral Traffic and Transit Agreement (QTTA) and other are been very useful in fostering connectivity in region. The QTTA is a framework agreement that was initiated between Pakistan, China, Afghanistan and central Asia to enhance the physical and non- physical connectivity in South Asian region for better trade and transit. It has provided new grounds for the development of relations to more active ones in areas of trade liberalization and transport connectivity in Central Asia. However, as Islam, & Cansu, (2020) mentioned that the political instability merely pointed at, especially the lack of resolution of the Kashmir issue creates further animosity between Pakistan and India and the economic disagreements restricted the optimum benefit of multilateral cooperation agreements.

However, despite huge improvement in bilateral and multilateral relations the political upheavals remain a major hindrance in the area. More recent conflicts such as the Taliban takeover in August 2021 have cast aspersions to the security and viability of current regional infrastructure development. According to Rauf (2021), the situation in Afghanistan is detrimental not only for the safe completion of such initiatives as CPEC but also threatens the overall stability of the region's political situations. However, conflict driven by political enmity such as that of Pakistan and India does prevent further multilateral integration of the region in a single bloc.

### ***Security Implications: Instability and Terrorism Risks***

Instability and terrorism are two important security threats that question successful implementation of connectivity projects in South and Central Asia region. As the establishments of connectivity arrangements

intensify, so does threats to security of the region on aspects such as the mentioned connectivity arrangements.

Afghanistan has been a sensitive and pivotal player in the region security framework. Recent political instability, on-going and emerging conflicts, and revival of radical outfits like the Taliban and ISIS-K put high risks on connectivity projects including CPEC and TAPI. There is for instance the TAPI pipeline that risks a lot on security issues because it passes through the conflict regions in Afghanistan. Khetran, & Khalid (2019) also opine that political instability in Afghanistan gives pause for thought with regard to big construction projects that need to access networks of transportation for materials and energy supplies.

Likewise, the persistent security threats, particularly through terrorist activism and insurgents, in the Pakistan's tribal areas and western borders have been posed a threat to the secure accomplishment of CPEC related projects. The separatist movement of the Baluch and numerous Islamic organizations have attacked infrastructural developments including the Gwadar Port. This insecurity has also resulted to prolongation of the projects duration and costs. In CPEC related concerns as Uralbayev, and Yermekbayev (2021) mentioned that the security challenges have been deepened by the poor relations between Pakistan and neighbours, Afghanistan that hampers regional cooperation.

The China's enhancement in security in the region especially by military in Pakistan to protect CPEC is a matter of controversy. While some the involvement of security in China are seen as positive for stability since security is needed for the protection of infrastructure projects (Rauf, 2021). Some, on the other hand, have argued sovereignty being that Chinese security personnel have gradually been deployed in Pakistan to protect assets. Another reason is also economic where Yu (2023) notes that expansion of Chinese power create concern of economic entrapment leading to possible future disagreements between China and other actors of the region.

However, there are signs suggesting that the regional security situation may be adjusted with greater interconnectivity of the participant countries. These three strategic challenges of instability and terrorism, combined with the increased profile of cyberspace, could be offset to some extent by multilateral security arrangements such as counterterrorism cooperation and information exchange. The three Ps of connectivity are a good starting point for assessments of South Asia's connectivity land-scape, but regional security cooperation is critical in the long term, especially Pakistan and China, including Central Asia.

The assessment of the economic, political-security aspect of Pakistan's connectivity linkages with Central Asia paints the picture of both potential and vulnerability. The commercial returns in the guise of trade volume, investment flows, and better infrastructure of the regions cannot and should not be denied. Nonetheless, the maximum benefit of these measures will be seen only when political relations remain secure politically and threat issues, especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan's neighboring areas, have been addressed. Although there has been tremendous attempts towards the

regional connectivity including CPEC open up incredible opportunities for economic cooperation, it also largely depends on the will, capacity and commitment of the regional countries to address the political and security issues and undertake necessary development for such integration.

### **Conclusion**

Present relations between Pakistan and Central Asia or even the progress made through these connectivity projects mark firstly a new era in relations between these two fertilized regions. With reference to BRI investment projects such as the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that offer potential to overcome geographic and infrastructural hurdles faced by the CARs owing to their geographical setup of being landlocked states. There however lies the rub, although the potential of economic development, better connectivity between trade routes, and cultural engagement is very manifest, translating these into realities is by no means easy. However, there are still many barriers that affect the reach of these connectivity projects even with great enhancement. On the economic front there have been signs of modest improvement in the foreign trade and FDI through such initiatives as the Gwadar port, CPEC and TAPI pipeline respectively. Such projects have created new trade corridors and improved access to the international markets particularly to the LDCs among which the CARs are part. Nevertheless, the economic effects are still relatively small in comparison with the expected advantages, which are still accompanied by less than expected rates of growth in the volume of trading activities and certain problems associated with the integration of supply chains in the region. This divergence of expectation from reality has called for additional investments in infrastructure and adoption of strategies that support interregional relations.

At the political level although, Pakistan and the CARs have been successful in upgrading their diplomatic relations through enrolment into the group of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and also by signing the QTTA agreement, but geopolitical rivalry endures. Interstate conflicts, especially involving the strategic sub-regional actors like Russia and India, poses the greatest threat should be left to escalate in the region without efforts toward diplomacy and formation of multilateral treaties. Besides, the security and more so the political stability of Afghanistan poses a major struggling connectivity plan. The security situation in the region suggests that every stakeholder must pull his or her resources together to ensure that developmental projects do not end up being jeopardized by militants or separatists. Issues of security, which remain as liabilities in the terrorism and political instabilities areas of the world, constitute a major threat to the effectiveness of these projects. The scenarios of militant groups' increased activity in Afghanistan and other border regions pose an additional factor of risk to the smooth running of trade arteries. For some scholars China's active participation in regional security is viewed as positive while others believe it interventionist undermining state sovereignty which makes identification of security more difficult. In other words, the connectivity projects including CPEC can transform the relationship between Pakistan and Central Asia

greatly, which could provide fresh ways for communication in the form of trade, energy cooperation and interchange of culture. But to realize these, the process is faced with strong barriers political risks, insecurity and more so physical facilities. The effectiveness of these efforts will be a function of Multi-regionalism, as well as infrastructure deployment with regards to political and security concerns that may hamper connectivity agendas.

### **Recommendations**

- However, for successful connectivity project it is important for Pakistan and Central Asian countries to improve diplomacy and work together in multilateral forums like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and Quadrilateral Traffic and Transit Agreement (QTTA). The enhancement of these partnerships will assist to overcome geopolitical difficulties and, therefore, create better cooperation for development in the region.
- Issues of insecurity such as the situation in Afghanistan therefore require that regional co-operation on intelligence and counter terrorism as well as the protection of supply lines is enhanced. The safety of these corridors will go a long way in maintaining their continuous connectivity and creating confidence within the investors and stakeholders.
- Improvement of connectivity together with focus on infrastructure investment, particularly transport and energy, is a key to unlock the potential of connectivity initiatives. Optimization and enlargement will help to improve the interactions in terms of trade and energy derivatives which in turn will enhance the cooperation among all the countries on the regional level as well as help create better economic potential for the participants of the interaction.
- The development of Public-private partnerships (PPPs) should be promoted to finance and deliver connectivity projects. Activities such as attractive private investment, of course, provide another form of resources such as knife and expertise which increase mega infrastructure projects by the government.
- Lastly, cultural and economic cooperation with the Islamic countries of Central Asia and development of mutual relations can play an important role in the improvement of cooperation. Educational and business exchanges as well as cultural development will provide better grounds for long-term integration and guarantee better results for further projects.

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