

Navigating Regional Connectivity via Belt and Road Initiative: Prospects and Challenges of South and Central Asian Integration amid Changing Geopolitical Dynamics

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Abstract

Promoting regional connectivity has been emerging as a new form of competition among states. In the quest for regional connectivity, China has launched Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to enhance its access to different regions by laying the land, rail, and sea routes infrastructure. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the BRI, envisages increasing connectivity and regional integration of South Asia and its adjacent regions. Both South and Central Asia serve each other's interests as one is energy-rich and the other is energy-deficient region. This study attempts to investigate how the BRI along with Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) is navigating and realizing the dream of regional connectivity? It further aims to explore the hurdles in the way to realize the dream of South and Central Asian connectivity and integration. However, the changing geopolitical dynamics, particularly the state of affairs in Afghanistan presents new set of challenges and affects the cause of South and Central Asian regional connectivity and integration. Afghanistan's geographical location between Pakistan and Central Asia, its volatile security situation, and the challenges emanating from US withdrawal have serious repercussions for regional connectivity and integration. On the whole, this article is the assessment of the role of BRI/CPEC and the opportunities and challenges for South and Central Asian regional connectivity and integration. This qualitative study utilises content analysis approach. This study concludes that CPEC is not just a connectivity initiative but an enabler of Central and South Asian integration despite enormous challenges in its execution.

Keywords: *Regional Connectivity, Integration, BRI, CPEC, South Asia, Central Asia.*

Introduction

In international relations, regional connectivity has grown in importance manifolds. A new wave of regional connectedness throughout Asia has been sparked by the new prospects brought about by massive economic development and connectivity projects like the Belt and Road Initiative. The Central Asia and South Asia are two crucial regions which are located at the bottleneck of China's BRI. Central Asia, being highly resource-enriched region, is constrained because of its landlocked nature. However, to

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materialize its inherent potential into reality, Central Asia must look for sea access to transport its (energy) products to the regional and global markets. In this scenario, Central Asian republics have been provided with enormous opportunities to expand their regional and international trade through economic development initiatives like CEREC and CPEC. The extensive consumer market will be connected by the proposed road and rail network, which will also give access to the region's abundant natural resources in Central Asia. As a result, it will have many chances for social, political, and economic prosperity which will eventually aide in addressing regional disputes. In this situation, Pakistan is crucial. With over 240 million residents, it offers a sizable consumer market in addition to giving landlocked Central Asian republics access to the sea via Gwadar port.

Afghanistan's strategic position is another important factor in this connectivity drive (Raza, 2024). Afghanistan must serve as a transit country in order to connect Central Asia with the CPEC. Afghanistan currently presents itself both as a hazard and a significant opportunity for regional connectivity. Every state in the region wants to take advantage of this opportunity and reduce the associated security risks. Construction of road and rail networks, increased human-to-human contact, improved political and economic ties between Central and South Asian states, and the promotion of regional economic integration will be made possible by CPEC (Khan et al., 2020; Khetran & Khalid, 2019). For the states of Central and South Asia, as well as for adjoining regions, it is an unmatched trade route that will open up new markets (Butt and Butt, 2016). For example, Tajikistan, the region's gateway to Pakistan and other nearby regional republics, will be used to connect Central Asia once the proposed Pak-China rail network is completed. Furthermore, a connection will be made with the Arabian Sea's maritime channels, which will link it to the Middle East and Africa (Khan et al., 2019).

Central Asia is located at the centre of the Eurasian continent. By integrating with Central Asia, Pakistan would be able to establish connections with Commonwealth nations, and Europe (Rasulovicha, 2018). When the CPEC is fully operationalized, trade will grow quickly, boosting the economy and providing Pakistan and the Central Asian states opportunities in several industries (Mahmood, 2023). The entire situation offers many opportunities for economic growth and the perfect setting for regional integration. However, this plan for economic integration and connectivity will continue to be threatened by the evolving situation in Afghanistan. This article particularly addresses the region's potential for economic growth as well as the security risks and difficulties emanating from Afghanistan. Its strategic location, geopolitical, and geoeconomic factors have continually drawn attention of major world powers. It acts as a vital conduit between Central Asia and Pakistan. Afghanistan lies along the historic trade route known as "The Silk Road" which passes through several Asian countries (Omrani, 2015).

Opportunities for regional collaboration are growing as a result of a number of circumstances. First, a new geopolitical environment has emerged in the region as a result of the departure of foreign forces from Afghanistan. Second, the emphasis of Pakistan's policy has recently changed from geopolitics to geo-economics, with a particular emphasis on resource diversification through economic measures. Pakistan has

a great deal of potential to become a center of regional development and connectivity by utilizing its geostrategic location and collaborating closely with Afghanistan and other regional actors like China and Russia that have similar interests in Afghanistan (Fischer & Stanzel, 2021).

Research Methods and Design

This study adopts a qualitative method and utilizes the qualitative content analysis technique to evaluate the prospects of regional connectivity and integration between Central and South Asia amid changing geopolitical dynamics of South Asia in general and Afghanistan in particular. The analytical approach adopted for this study deconstructs CPEC and CAREC into their core components—such as infrastructure projects, energy investments, and security dimensions—to comprehend their impact on regional economic prosperity and connectivity. To find patterns of strategic activity among China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asian republics, empirical evidence is gathered from government publications, scholarly works, policy briefs, and media analysis. The study employs the theoretical framework of neo-functionalism as it appears to be the most pertinent choice to comprehend the phenomenon of regional integration between the Central and South Asia. Data has been acquired by both primary and secondary sources including primary materials, such as government publications and policy documents, and secondary materials, including peer-reviewed articles and expert commentaries. This method guarantees a thorough comprehension of CPEC and CAREC's twin function in the region as a strategic challenge and an economic driver.

Theoretical Model for Regional Integration of Central and South Asia

Since the 1950s, regionalism has been studied in a variety of theoretical contexts. The idea now has a lot more dimensions owing to the current theoretical discussion. The early idea of federalism was primarily connected to European integration (Hass, 1958). Functionalism was later proposed as an alternative strategy. The breadth of both theoretical concepts was constrained. Neo-regionalism has a more powerful and expansive idea. However, this hypothesis has been deemed outdated in the European setting by Earnest B. Hass. Moreover, this idea remains applicable when considering regional integration initiatives in other continents, particularly Asia. In the Asian setting, ASEAN is regarded as a pertinent and earlier model. But the integration movement in South Asia and Central Asia over the past 20 years has paved the way for yet another prosperous model. Neo-functionalism theory appears to be highly pertinent to comprehend this occurrence. Regionalism was elevated to a new level by Neo-Functionalism. "An opportunity in which the establishment and deepening of integration in one economic area would produce a stimulus for greater integration in other sectors of the economy and beyond," is the main premise of the "spillover" (Warleigh-Lack, et al,2011).

The idea of regional integration is not exclusive to the EU only. Numerous integration initiatives have been carried out in various global locations. Despite the Eurocentricity of Neofunctionalism researchers, regionalism's deliberate efforts have

made this theory very suitable for comprehending the dynamics of regionalism in Asia in general and Central and South Asia in particular in this age of globalized ideas. Neofunctionalism may be the most appropriate theoretical paradigm to characterize a relatively recent drive in Central and South Asia.

The theory makes the case for the positive spillover effect, which states that integration in one economic sector causes integration in another. Experts have been speculating about the possibility of Central and South Asian economic integration since the early 1990s. Numerous prospects for collaboration in other areas have been identified as a result of the construction of transportation links between the two regions. This has aided the regional states in strengthening their collaboration as well as their institutional ability to regulate it going forward. Neofunctionalism promotes cooperation between states that are close to one another and have an interest in economic integration. The Central and South Asian region has joined several regional organizations, including ECO and SCO, and formalized its state-level regional integration initiatives. They have shown their willingness to work together by their collaborative economic undertakings under CPEC, BRI, and CEREC. Expanding the scope of collaboration is encouraged by early integration success. Economic cooperation serves as the basis for greater institutionalization, and large-scale integration across all areas. By removing geographical barriers through the building of roads and other transportation infrastructure, the political ties that were established between Central and South Asia in the final decade of the previous century served as a catalyst for extensive commercial cooperation.

Some important causative variables that promote interdependence among regional states are presented by the neo-functionalism theory. In order to increase the potential and likelihood of regional integration initiatives, it not only selects sectors for collaboration but also encourages them to settle the regional conflicts. There has been a strong desire to resolve Afghanistan, the region's largest security challenge, and this type of stimulus has been present in the regional integration efforts of Central-South Asia through the SCO platform. All Central Asian nations, including Pakistan, understand how crucial Afghanistan's stability is to the accomplishment of regional integration initiatives like CAREC and CPEC.

China's Regional Connectivity Drive through BRI/CPEC

Coordinating significant regional cooperation has historically been difficult for South Asian governments. With no summit meetings since 2014, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established by South Asian heads of state in 1985, has failed to advance regional cooperation. Even with Myanmar included and Pakistan excluded, the 1997-founded Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Scientific Technological Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has not taken on its dynamic posture. South Asia is still regarded as one of the world's least integrated regions. Xi Jinping, after assuming party's leadership in 2012, unveiled the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. China adopted a new development plan that was appropriate for

its position as the second-largest economy in the world. Known as "the World's Factory," China has established a vast supply chain and manufacturing network and is now the biggest trading partner of the majority of Asian nations (Wareen, 2024). China was able to develop business and investment opportunities overseas, especially in its immediate neighbourhood and at strategically significant locations across South Asia, thanks to its improved financial and technological capabilities. Through the pursuit of three main development lines of effort within the larger BRI, China concentrated on fostering bilateral and trilateral partnerships with South Asian states. Implementation of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor has stalled, despite notable advancements in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) (Mahmood et al., 2022).

The "Zipper of Pan-Eurasian Integration" is another name for CPEC. Wider geographic ties will result from this integration strategy, linking all neighbouring states and regions from Pakistan to North Asia, West Asia, and Central Asia, including states that are members of several significant regional organizations with Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), SCO, ECO, and SAARC members. This strategy's central claim is that CPEC complements Eurasian integration (Korybko, 2017). All of the Central Asian republics' leaders have publicly supported and firmly devoted to China and Pakistan's positions, and they are actively collaborating with them for regional connectivity and integration for mutual economic gains. Every Central Asian state is interested to participating in CPEC projects and views Gwadar Seaport, the project's entry point, as a gateway to the world's shipping lanes (Saleem, 2018). During their bilateral meetings, the leaders of these states reaffirmed their commitment to providing access to the entire world (Khetran & Khalid, 2019). The Gwadar Seaport and other CPEC-built infrastructure are thought to be equivalent of Suez Canal for both China and CARs (The Nation, 2017). These investments by China through CPEC in South Asia indicate that the region is going through a gradual transformation in terms of economic development and integration.

CAREC: Regional Integration with South Asia

Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) was established in 1997 and was joined by ten regional states with the goal of fostering greater regional economic cooperation. Pakistan joined CAREC in 2010. Afghanistan, five Central Asian republics, South Caucasus states, and China are among its eleven members to date. CAREC is collaborating with Azerbaijan and six international organizations including: the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the United Nations Development Programme. ADB serves as the secretariat for CAREC. This program is practical, goal-oriented, and project-based (Asian Development Bank, 2017b). Through Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, this initiative will link Pakistan to markets in Europe and Russia. Pakistan's participation in CAREC is important for advancing its regional economic objectives. Under the motto "Good Neighbours,

Good Partners, and Good Prospects," CAREC members are collaborating to promote development, reduce poverty, and accelerate economic growth. CAREC 2030: Connecting the Region for Shared and Sustainable Development was agreed at the 16th CAREC Ministerial Conference in 2017 and will serve as the program's roadmap for 2030. It offered effective guidance on matters pertaining to regional development and integration. In order to promote regional cooperation and establish a connection between individuals, initiatives, and policies for sustainable and shared development, CAREC's 2030 plan is endorsed by all the member states (Asian Development Bank, 2020).

Economic stability; commerce, tourism, and economic corridors; infrastructure, and economic connectivity; agriculture; and human development are the five sectors that CAREC 2030 will focus on (Asian Development Bank, 2017a). Trade, energy, and transportation are all crucial components of regional cooperation and integration, which is the foundation of the strategy. According to Waheed et al. (2020), Pakistan and other Central Asian nations that are a part of the CAREC platform stand to gain the most from the growth of regional connectivity. The synergy between the CAREC and the CPEC could enable Pakistan to play the role of a regional transport and trade hub (Asian Development Bank, 2022). Between 2001 and 2020, 208 projects were completed, and member nations invested a total of 39.2 billion US dollars. These investments achieved considerable success for regional economic cooperation and were recognized in the domains of energy, transportation, trade, and economic corridor. It has contributed about 1.47 billion US dollars to Pakistan's transportation and commercial industries.

The 2020 CAREC Ministerial Conference prioritized standardization and quality, skills development, and infrastructure and connectivity while agreeing to finalize a regional free trade agreement. The CAREC Tourism Strategy 2030 (CST) goal and emphasis on promoting safe regional travel were warmly received at the meeting. Pakistani Minister Khusro Bukhtyar suggested during the meeting that the CAREC Business Council be established and that the private sector be actively involved in the creation of a regional tourism corridor (Kiani, 2020).

Through the CAREC strategy for regional connectivity in the energy and transportation sectors, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has provided support to Pakistan. This support includes (a) the TAPI gas pipeline, (b) the extension of CAREC corridors to Pakistan's seaports of Gwadar and Karachi, and (c) the creation of economic corridors with trade and transportation assistance to boost economic opportunities for those in the area. Through funding and technical assistance, ADB is helping the transportation industry to strengthen regional ties (Asian Bank Development, 2022). Two of the six routes under CAREC's regional connectivity vision—which has been supported by the World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and other multilateral development banks—pass through Pakistan. These routes will lessen the difficulties faced by landlocked states that had to deal with expensive and time-consuming trade between Central Asian nations and regional seaports (Rafiq, 2021).

Regional connectivity and facilitating smooth trade among regional member states are the primary objectives of the CAREC. Due to their landlocked status, its

members rely on other nations for both regional and international trade. Regional trade and economic cooperation will be enhanced via all CAREC transport corridors, including road and rail networks, logistics, and the supply chain that passes through all member nations. This project will assist in resolving landlocked states' accessibility and commerce problems (Akbar, 2018). Regarding the CAREC Corridors, former Finance Minister Ishaq Dar stated that trade between these landlocked governments would rise once they had access to the world's seas. It will have an impact on employment, mobility, competitiveness, and productivity both locally and globally (Saud, 2018).

In order to expedite border crossing clearance procedures and infrastructure development, four states—Pakistan, Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Mongolia—have chosen to implement the Regional Improvement of Border Services (RIBS) plan. If the situation in Afghanistan becomes unstable yet bilateral energy projects like the CASA-1000, TAPI, and Trans Afghan railway lines cannot be avoided from Afghanistan (Khetran & Khalid, 2019).

Changing Geopolitical Dynamics of Afghanistan: Prospects and Barriers for Central and South Asian Integration

Kabul's ability to function as a crucial transit hub for trade and energy has been hindered by political unrest and security worries, but there are opportunities to take advantage of its location to improve Pakistan-Central Asian economic ties for increased regional cooperation and long-term investment (Rashid & Sarwar, 2025).

Afghanistan has long been a vital component of the historic Silk Road. Afghanistan's geographical location has made it possible for the resource-rich Central Asian republics to access global markets through Pakistan's warm water ports (Ghiasy & Zhou, 2017). Afghanistan has been recognized as a key participant in the CAREC program, which was created in 1997 to promote regional connectivity. In particular, CAREC corridors like Corridor 5 and Corridor 6 are intended to enhance trade routes across Afghanistan, which could strengthen Pakistani and Central Asian economic connections. Nonetheless, there are major obstacles in the way of Afghanistan's potential being realized. Although the infrastructure for the CAREC projects CASA-1000, TUTAP, and TAPI has mostly been completed in Central Asia, the withdrawal of foreign sponsors has caused major delays in construction inside Afghanistan. The TUTAP, CASA-1000, and TAPI are all very crucial projects that involve Afghanistan's territory. The advancement of these projects is hampered by this stalling (Saleem, 2018).

The establishment of reliable regional connectivity is being severely hampered by internal issues in Afghanistan. Political unrest, regional rivalries, and rebel attacks have persisted throughout the nation since NATO's withdrawal in 2022. While terrorist groups like the “Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP)”, “Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)”, and “Al Qaeda” keep on expanding their operations, the Taliban nevertheless hold sway over a sizable portion of the country (Javaid & Siraj, 2021b). As a result, other countries are reluctant to acknowledge Taliban government there. Their capacity to finance infrastructure projects has been hampered by financial isolation brought on by

economic sanctions. Moreover, trade routes are being disrupted by climate changes, aging infrastructure, growing local needs, and seasonal variations in power and water, which frequently result in border closures and higher costs for cross-border transactions (Rauf & Saud, 2021).

Despite these obstacles, Afghanistan offers tremendous potential for improved regional connectivity, transportation, and energy networks, which can help the country increase regional trade, and draw in investments from private sector. Afghanistan may better utilize its minerals, develop human potential, generate employment, and finance necessary services by economically integrating with its CAREC neighbours. Even though Afghanistan's economic prospects have been hindered by its isolation from the global financial system, regional entities are increasingly realizing that investing in Afghanistan can lead to economic progress. One such example is BRI, which touches on CAREC initiatives. Improved connectivity with Central Asia via Afghanistan will be especially beneficial to Pakistan (Faisal, 2019). Pakistan may act as a major transit channel for the exports of CARs to the international market through its ports. Building transnational highways, railroads, and energy pipelines across Afghanistan might speed up trade and promote regional economic integration by lowering transportation costs and times. Pakistan and Central Asian nations should adopt a comprehensive strategy that tackles current issues while simultaneously looking to the future in order to fully realize Afghanistan's potential as a hub for regional connectivity. This is required as the execution of the CAREC project is directly impacted by an unstable Afghanistan. Key actions are outlined in the recommendations below:

- **Infrastructure:** Make completion of important infrastructure projects in Afghanistan a top priority, including TAPI, TUTAP, and CASA-1000. Public-private collaborations backed by multilateral organizations like ADB are crucial to fulfill the funding shortfalls.
- **Regional security cooperation:** In order to improve security and safeguard trade routes, it is recommended to strengthen regional cooperation on intelligence sharing.
- **Economic diversification:** To create a robust Afghan economy, promote investment in a variety of industries, including technology, mining, and agriculture.
- **Diplomatic engagement:** Focus on connectivity and economic issues independently of political ones in order to engage the Taliban government in a constructive manner.
- **Addressing climate resilience:** Finally, mitigating seasonal interruptions and guaranteeing a consistent supply of resources depend on collaboration on climate resilience and resource management.

By carrying out these steps, Afghanistan may improve its position as a transit hub and help CAREC foster more political and economic cooperation throughout Central and South Asia, which will be advantageous to the region as a whole. Although the program has the potential to address problems like poverty, instability, and poor

governance and lessen Afghanistan's need on foreign aid, its success hinges on overcoming major obstacles and winning ongoing support from all parties involved.

Conclusion

Both the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have enormous potential to improve connectivity between Pakistan, the Central Asian region, and all surrounding territories. Pakistan must quicken its pace of growth. Cartography is a powerful tool for expressing current geopolitics, even though it is not immediately feasible to turn all CAREC and CPEC maps into an operational foreign policy. All of this demonstrates the mutual reliance of the regional states and the tremendous significance of the regional connectivity push. With the help of CAREC and CPEC, Pakistan will become a major hub for regional trade and transportation, and the western parts of China will integrate through this initiative. Three Central Asian states are connected to the Chinese province of Xinjiang. Thus, this project will investigate ways for Central Asian nations to link Pakistani ports via Afghanistan and China. Pakistan would have an edge over other regional connectivity projects like the Lipis Lazuli Corridor once it is implemented because of its advantageous location, which makes it a natural gateway to the Central Asian region both regionally and globally.

In nutshell, it is concluded that CPEC would not only be a connectivity initiative but also enable the Central Asian region to access international markets and transform itself. There are a lot of opportunities for regional connectivity in Pakistan and Central Asia. Along with a shared colonial past, both areas are currently facing political and economic difficulties. They also perceive threats in a similar way. In this case, collaborating for shared economic growth and fostering integration across all sectors is the best course of action for both areas. However, implementing economic growth projects requires a secure and tranquil atmosphere. Afghanistan is in urgent need of economic repair and rehabilitation in addition to serving as a natural physical link between two areas. The establishment of such regional connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia has been severely hampered by the decades-long war on Afghan land. Not only would peace in Afghanistan aid in the fulfillment of this ambition, but it will also be a significant step toward the development of Afghanistan specifically and the region as a whole. Afghanistan's economic stability is essential for the region as a whole.

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