

Socio-economic Cooperation between Pakistan and Central Asia: A Potential for Regional Prosperity

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Abstract

A region of significant historical in nature, cultural, and geopolitical significance is Central Asia. It is a fascinating and active region of the world because of its advantageous position, historic civilizations, abundant natural resources, and different cultures. Central Asia is positioned to become more significant on the international scene as long as it keeps developing and seizing new chances. Pakistan has been enhancing its ties with Central Asian nations in recent times by means of high-level trips, cultural exchanges, joint ventures, and economic forums. Extending economic cooperation, fostering regional stability, improving people-to-people ties, and capitalizing on its advantageous location as an intermediate point between South Asia as well as Central Asia are among Pakistan's foreign policy goals in the region. The paper narrates the significance of socio-economic cooperation among the Central Asian Republics and Pakistan to secure the interests of Pakistan in the region and at the same time analyses various economic, defense and geo-strategic factors that have shaped Pakistan's policy towards Central Asia. The secondary source data have been used to conduct the paper which portrays current geopolitics in Central Asia as an impediment and Afghanistan as bottleneck in Pakistan's access to Central Asia.

Keywords: Pakistan, Central Asia, Post-Soviet era, Joint projects, Cooperation, Foreign policy, Interest, Strategic resources, Stability

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan has always maintained a close relationship with its neighboring countries, especially those in Central Asia. The country's foreign policy towards Central Asia has been shaped by a long and complex historical background, which has played a significant role in defining its diplomatic approach towards the region. The ties between Pakistan and Central Asia can be traced back to the ancient Silk Road, a trade route that connected the two regions and facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures. This early interaction laid the foundation for the strong relationship between Pakistan and Central Asian countries.¹

¹ Ali, Mehrunnisa. *Readings in Pakistan Foreign Policy 1971-1998*. Oxford university press, 2001.

In the era of Cold War, due to US's pressure, Pakistan had bound to make relations with Central Asia, which had big impact on Pakistan's foreign policy along the time. This alliance grew stronger after 1979 when Russia went into Afghanistan since then became even more important for American interests around this time carried out its resistance against Soviets with a huge contribution from Pakistani side. As a result, there was a notable reorientation in Pakistan's external relations whereby there was more participation in regional issues and the establishment of strong connections within Central Asia specifically Kazakhstan; Uzbekistan; Turkmenistan.² A significant change in the dynamics of the region occurred after the Soviet Union came to an end in 1991. Central Asian countries became independent and had to try to create their own nations. One of the initial countries that recognized and established official relations with new state was Pakistan, led by its then Prime Minister Ms. Benazir Bhutto. This not only cemented Pakistan's position within the region as an important player, but also unlocked fresh opportunities for business as well as cultural ties.

Notably, for both parts, the significance of the socio-economic cooperation amid Pakistan and Central Asia in the two regions is enormous. Pakistan is located in such a way that it can benefit much more if it strengthens connections with other Central Asian states, as it is situated at a geographical junction of South Asia, West Asia, and Central Asia. It is reality that Pakistan serves as a gateway for the landlocked central Asian countries that are endowed with natural resources. Due to the opportunities it offers for trade, energy cooperation and regional connectivity, both regions benefit from this partnership. Pakistan has great opportunities in power sector from Central Asia's vast energy resources for satisfying their increasing needs for energy support. Nevertheless, proximity of the port of Gwadar provides a route through which goods could be sold in other countries for Central Asian states. Collaboration in tourism, agriculture, and education could drive growth that is regional. Likewise, this partnership encourages peace between communities and nations through promotion of mutual understanding and communication. Therefore, the socioeconomic cooperation between Pakistan and Central Asia could significantly benefit both regions.³

Pakistan has directed its focus on improving economic ties with countries in Central Asia. For this reason, the significance of Pakistan in the area has increased due to the BRI, and one of the primary projects is the CPEC. Pakistan's associations with Central Asian nations have been enhanced significantly by the SCO and ECO; likewise, the nation's economic bonds with China have prospered courtesy of this initiative. This has further triggered the opening up of untapped markets in Central Asia. Many people in academic circles as well as other areas have been keen on establishing a relationship between Pakistan and Central Asia. Within which numerous studies were conducted to determine how these two areas interacted economically or socially over time. From the studies it has been discovered that many areas concerning this relationship such as trade links, building more roads, cultural exchange and sometimes political ties are now well understood.

² Musa Khan, Jalalzai . *Road from Afghanistan to Central Asia*. Lahore: Institute of Current Affairs. (1992)

³ Ali, Mehrunnisa. *Readings in Pakistan Foreign Policy 1971-1998*. Oxford university press, 2001.

Political geography and history are explaining the ways through which Pakistan has related with Central Asia. It highlighted how Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent Afghan War has shaped the course of cooperation between Pakistan and Central Asia as well as led to the transformation of the region's political landscape. The lack of realized economic potential between the two regions was attributed to bad transport and infrastructure. The need for improved economic relations was the target of this matter, as were the impediments to trade and investment between these separate locations due to poor transport and other necessary means.

It is argued that highlighting mutual cultural and linguistic traits enhance group bonds and enhance face-to-face interactions. The appraisal underscored that Pakistan could obtain oil from Central Asia but this would be difficult because of poor roads in Afghanistan.⁴

Issues of security are similar in Pakistan as well as Central Asia for this reason there must be collaboration in the fight against terrorism and extremism. The past research pointed out the necessity of a joint effort combating these common threats.⁵

The political circumstances surrounding Pakistan's association with Central Asia. The review examined how regional and international powers affect collaboration between both of these areas and how their objectives and stances can help or impede the development of bilateral relations.⁶

Research Questions

- What is the Significance of Socio and Economic Cooperation between Pakistan and Central Asia?
- How will the Defense and Strategic Cooperation among Central Asian states and Pakistan promote Peace and Development in the Region?
- How can socio economic and defense-strategic relations impact future relations between Pakistan and Central Asia?

Research Objectives

- To highlight the significance of socio-economic cooperation between Pakistan and Central Asia
- To analyze recent events in the Central Asian Region and possible future outcomes for defense and strategic cooperation that will promote peace and development in the region.
- To examine the impact of socio-economic and defense-strategic relations that will improvise future relations between Pakistan and Central Asian States.

Pakistan and Central Asia

Pakistan's relationship with Central Asian states has been shaped by various factors, including geographical proximity, historical and cultural linkages, economic interests, and geopolitical considerations. Pakistan focused primarily on consolidating its relations with neighboring countries such as India, China, Afghanistan, and Iran. However, with the emergence of independent Central Asian states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in

⁴ Mazhar, Muhammad Saleem, and Naheed S. Goraya. "External Challenges to Pakistan's National Security." *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 56, no. 1 (2019): 117.

⁵ Durrani, Ahmad Shah. "Ahmad Shah Durrani." In *Punjab History Conference, Thirty-second Session, March 17-19, 2000: Proceedings*, p. 82. Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 2001.

⁶ Khan, Shabir Ahmad, and Muhammad Khan. "Pakistan-Russia collaboration: Implications for Afghanistan and Central Asia." *Central Asia Journal* 84 (2019): 1-13.

1991, Pakistan recognized the importance of engaging with these countries and transformed its foreign policy towards Central Asia by establishing strong ties. The official visit of Pakistan delegation under the Minister of State for Economic Affairs; Sardar Assed Ahmed Ali, to Central Asian States has signed the memoranda of understanding with each of every state and signed bilateral economic agreements. It was also penned down that Tajikistan will provide 4000 MV electricity to Pakistan at the cost of \$500 million by 1997. Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have also entered into a barter agreement with Pakistan for the supply of tea, wheat, rice and meat from Pakistan in exchange for their goods.⁷

Pakistan and Central Asia shared the history of cooperation even before its independence which would be clearly understand by the event of “Tashkent declaration -1965” and always support Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir. Central Asian Republics are enriched in natural resources and able to supply oil, gas, electricity, minerals as copper, iron, chrome and lead to Pakistan and in return Pakistan will supply textile goods, cement, medicines, shoes, machinery and telecommunication equipment. ECO Foreign Ministers Conference were held at Islamabad in 1992 in which representatives of Central Asian States assured Pakistan a firm support on the issue of Kashmir and marked the agreements on mutual trade, economic cooperation, developing commercial and financial institution, assistance in technology, fostering cultural and media exchange and establishing infrastructure of road, rails, and air links for growing economy and development. In addition, President of Pakistan, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, also stressed on developing common market for trade, generate our own capital and finances to provide financial security and support to ECO member countries. Pakistan has also offered central Asian states to access its market and ports to facilitate free market economy.⁸

Pakistan and Kazakhstan

Sardar Assef Ahmed Ali, Minister of State for Economic Affairs along with the delegation visited the Central Asian states in November- December 1991 to sign the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and also made an offer of 10 million dollars to Kazakhstan for relieving the initial hardships of newly independent states. Beside the offer made by Pakistan to Kazakhstan, the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan interrupted and asked for 300 million dollars instantly which was answered in an accommodating manner to the representatives of Kazakh Government. Moreover, the construction of hotel Alma Ata, opening of Pakistani banks in Kazakhstan, trading through Centre Credit Kazakh's bank and Punjab and Meezan Bank, joint ventures in several fields and industries; Kazakh retail chain Magnum, Atameken Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Shymkent Chamber of Entrepreneurs, Nimir Chemicals, Herboin Pharma and signing the letter for barter trade among Tabani cooperation, Pakistan and Kazakhstan marked the intentions of good will for each other.⁹

The President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, visited Pakistan after becoming a sovereign state and indulged in developing cordial and bilateral relations in 1992. It was crucial to make economic and social bonds within a region to get support for stability in contemporary economic and security dilemmas. Central Asian States are enriched in

⁷ Amin, Tahir. "Pakistan and the Central Asian States." *Strategic Studies* 16, no. 4 (1994): 5-22.

⁸ Ibid4

⁹ Ibid1

energy resources but lack of alternative energy routes to international market hindered the supply which overcame by giving the Central Asian States membership of ECO in 1992 which not only provided the trade linkage but tariff reduction as well.¹⁰ In addition, the expansion of \$4-8 trillion projects like “Belt and Road Initiative” which paved a way for not only to build bilateral trade and cooperation but also connected the Central Asia with South Asia and became the transit hub. The main products of Kazakhstan sold to Pakistan were Peroxometallic Acid Salts, Cold-Rolled Iron and Hot-Rolled Iron which made accumulative import of \$19.7M in 2021.

Zhumangarin and a delegation from the Pakistani government met in Astana in November 2022 to talk about collaboration in the energy industry, including gas transit via the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) energy pipeline. The Federal Minister of State for Industry and Production, Syed Murtaza Mahmood, stated: "The demand for energy resources in our country is rising annually." Pakistan boasts a population of over 200 million, making it a vast market. Regretfully, we lack minerals but do have a well-developed rail network and transportation system.

Since Kazakhstan is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Astana International Finance Center has given, it accesses to 180 million consumers, both governments of Kazakhstan as well as Pakistan can initiate a number of projects through their bilateral relations. These initiatives will ultimately increase demand for and exports from Pakistan. Among the main initiatives to increase bilateral commerce and tourism are the invitations that Pakistan has extended to Kazakhstan to take part in the OIC Trade, exhibit Kazakhstani goods and services, as well as promote the nation's history, culture, and tourism potential. Pakistan has also sent a trial caravan of cars to Kazakhstan to determine the viability of the land route.¹¹

Pakistan and Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is largest Muslim state with the population of 40 million people which possess high literacy rate and extraordinary education standard. Uzbekistan is enriched in gold, cooper, rice and cotton and by the bilateral agreements with Pakistan - Uzbekistan 1992 established communication links, deployed telecommunication equipment, construction of road, railway tracks and highways, joint ventures in the field of industrial and agriculture manufacturing. The Inter-governmental Commission upon Trade-Economic as well as Scientific-Technical Cooperation (IGC) between Pakistan and Uzbekistan met recently in Tashkent, and during that meeting, a \$1 billion deal was signed between the two countries to increase bilateral trade. This would be very beneficial for the exchange of goods and services, as Pakistan has enough foreign reserve to cover three weeks' worth of imports. (\$1billion trade deal signed with Uzbekistan, 2023)

Pakistan Exports to Uzbekistan was US\$48.79 Million during 2021 in which rice, medicaments and potatoes were the main products, according to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade. (Pakistan Exports to Uzbekistan, 2023) Contrary to it, pure cotton yarn, zinc and dried legumes were import to Pakistan which made the total import of \$150 million in 2021.

¹⁰Saud, A. Pakistan's Policy towards Central Asian Republics. In D. I. Khalid, Pakistan foreign Policy (pp. 352-372). Lahore: Peace Publication. (2013).

¹¹ Rafiq, M. Pakistan and Kazakhstan Relations: A Way Forward. *Daily Times*. (2023).

Tajikistan- Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan

Pakistan is facing degradation in energy sectors and central Asian states are enriched in energy resources which made Pakistan seeks to diversify its energy resources and enhance energy cooperation with Central Asian states. The region is rich in hydrocarbon reserves, including oil and natural gas, and Pakistan has expressed interest in tapping into these resources to meet its energy demands. Various initiatives, such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project comprised of 1,814 km pipeline will transport 3.2 billion cubic feet of natural gas have been proposed to facilitate energy cooperation and another proposed pipeline from Dawlatabad field in Turkmenistan to Gawadar Port with the provision of \$3 billion from Asian Development Bank. Project like the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) hydroelectricity transmission line and the establishment of trade routes have been pursued to counter the energy crises in Pakistan and high transmission lines were proposed from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan through North- Eastern Afghan strip of Wakhan with the cost of \$873 million which will provide 3300 megawatts of electricity to Pakistan. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan also wanted to export electricity which will eliminate the shortage of load shedding in Pakistan.¹²

Pakistan provides the shortest land route to access the seaport of Karachi, it is estimated that the distance from Dushanbe to Karachi is 2700km which is far less than the route to Pacific Ocean (9500km), Black Sea (4200km) and Gulf (3200km) and 650km of land route from Dushanbe to Peshawar. There are other several routes that connect Central Asia to Pakistan like Karakoram Highway which connect Pakistan through Khunjrab Pass and Chinese Turkestan town of Kashghar to the Kazakhstan capital of Alma Ata, a land route from Chaman and Quetta by the route of Qandhar and Herat over the Oxus into Central Asia, communication route from Peshawar-Jalalabad-Termez on the Oxus to Tajikistan, Chitral and Wakhan corridor into Tajikistan and last route through Iran to Turkeministan by following the path from Quetta to Koh-i-Taftan and Zahidan to Ashkabad. Pakistan has an intention to construct motorways in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan to improve its links with Central Asia. Indus highway, double railway track, developing of sea ports are in the process to make the fastest and shortest route from Peshawar to Karachi to cater the cargo traffic from Central Asia to reach the market of Africa, South-East Asia and Middle East.¹³

In 2011, The Hairatan-Mazar-i-Sharif rail line was built between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan with the support of Asian Development Bank \$165 million and Uzbekistan is intending to expand this project to Peshawar which will reduce the time span to half along with 35% reduction in transport cost. The other great deal signed between Uzbekistan and Pakistan is Transit Trade Agreement (TTA) which was held on July 15, 2021 in Tashkent that will allow the free flow of commodities among the states. On the other hand, Afghanistan is accepting freight for trade via road via the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, or the Chinese region of Xinjiang. A business representative, Ambassador Kistafin stated, "Kazakhstan plans on signing a Transit alongside Trading Agreement (TTA) with the nation of Pakistan, which is extremely significant as it provides a legal

¹² Saud, A. Pakistan's Policy towards Central Asian Republivs. In D. I. Khalid, *Pakistan foriegn Policy* (pp. 352-372). Lahore: Peace Publication. (2013).

¹³ Amin, T. PAKISTAN AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES. In T. Amin, *PAKISTAN AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES*. Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad. (Summer 1994): pp. Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 5-22.

structure to the enterprises of both nations to develop trade ties," on February 12, 2023, during the the city of Karachi Chamber of Business and Industry. The TTA will hasten trade between two parties.¹⁴

Pakistan and Central Asian countries have built strong economic ties over the years through trade, investments, and regional connectivity projects. Bilateral trade between Pakistan and Central Asia has grown significantly, reaching over \$500 million in recent years. Major trading partners include Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Pakistan's close ties with China have provided opportunities for trilateral cooperation, particularly in the areas of infrastructure development, trade, and security. Pakistan has started making serious moves to strengthen ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Through CPEC, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Pakistan wants to extend that corridor northwards to connect with Central Asia. There are plans in the works for road and rail links that would provide the region with new trade routes and connections to seaports. Pakistan sees huge economic and strategic potential in Central Asia, with its natural resources and location along China's Belt and Road Initiative. Ties between Pakistan and Central Asia go back centuries, but the future of their relationship may be the most promising yet. There are deals to be made and fortunes to be found as these neighbors come together to build bridges for regional prosperity.

Defense and Strategic Cooperation: Securing Peace and Development in the Region

After the withdrawal of U.S troops from Afghanistan and taking charge of Afghan Government by Taliban escalated the risk of terrorism and instability in the region. After the Islamic State Khurasan Province (ISKP) started a jihadist propaganda campaign to recruit Tajik, Uzbek, and Kyrgyz foreign fighters and volunteers has proved to be the springboard for militants and terrorist threat became more tangible in the region. Throughout the history of central Asia, it's been under the spotlight of Media due to local upheavals, riots, protests on the basis of ethnicity, governance, political and economic instability.¹⁵

Kazakh President called for Collective Security Treaty Organization to take control over protest amid due to socio-economic grievances in the state. This tremendous help from president Putin to President Tokayev during the crises because it was not grant to the interim government of Kyrgyzstan and Armenia. Kazakhstan has been investing in its own military force to combat the militants as Nur-Sultan called these local entities which brought cataclysm in the state "foreign agents and terrorist attempts to destabilize the country".¹⁶

Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), autonomous strategic region at the Eastern Tajikistan and border security problems with Afghanistan, has been under the civil unrest on the demand of the resignation of the Mayor of Khorugh (Alisher Mirzonabot) and terrorist attack which Tajikistan needs to manage to guarantee national stability and security. This traumatic situation led to the antiterrorist operation against the militants who were intended to block Dushanbe-Khorugh-Kulma highway to interrupt the trade (BRI) and destabilize the state (Bifolchi, Political Tensions and Security Threats in Tajikistan, 2022). Taliban has taken control of the main Afghan border crossing with Tajikistan, Shir

¹⁴ Gupta, P. K. why are central asian republics wooing pakistan? *VIF India*. (2021).

¹⁵ Bifolchi, G. Central Asian Republics Between Socio-Economic Projects, Popular Protests, Terrorist Threats and The Afghan Dilemma. *specialeurasia*. (2022).

¹⁶ Kassenova, N. Kazakhstan in Crisis: Politics and Geopolitics. *Expressions by Montaigne*. (2022).

Khan Bandar, in June 2021. Considering the severity of the situation, the Tajik President ordered deployment of an additional 20,000 military personnel to bolster the security of the border with Afghanistan. (Tajikistan calls up reservists to bolster border as Afghan troops flee Taliban, 2021)

Karakalpakstan is an autonomous region situated to north-western Uzbekistan and made up the 40% of Uzbekistan territory. Poverty prevails in the country with rate of 16.4% and monthly average wage is less than \$400 along with different ethnic identity which hampered the decisiveness in the bonding of karakalpakstan and Uzbekistan. In July 2022, the government of Uzbekistan has introduced certain constitutional amendments which will reduce the Karakalpakstan autonomy and its right to secede and presented for approval through referendum. The situation in the state got worsened and emergency were declared in Karakalpakstan. The President Mirziyoyev claimed that “forces from abroad” have planned the hostility for years to bring unrest in the country.¹⁷

Central Asian republics need regional stability to stimulate socio-economic development by countering terrorism, ethnicity, political and economic instability. After the eruption of Ukraine-Russia war, it is crucial to balance the foreign and economic policies among the regional powers which were mandatory to get support to maintain peace and economic development. The role of China and Russia in the region is undeniable as China has invested copious amount in the project of “Belt and Road Initiative” (Central Asian Republics’ Economic Dependence on China, 2022) and along with historical link of Russia with Central Asia, Moscow established the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to promote military and political cooperation to CIS.¹⁸

Central Asian states were the eminent historical allies of Russia and never spoke against the Kremlin’s action but Ukraine war brought a dynamic shift in their relation and perspective regarding the war and considered it to be a game-changer in regional dynamics. In the longer run, Central Asian states has to move away from the Russian orbit towards other regional players.¹⁹ “The way Central Asia thinks about Russia has changed. While before, Russia was seen as a source of stability, it now seems that its presence in a very sensitive security dimension has become a weakness for the regional stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity”. (Temur Umarov, a fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center)

Regional security has been a top priority for Pakistan and Central Asian States and both share the border with Afghanistan which is the reason of stimulating threats like terrorism, smuggling, human trafficking, and infiltration of militant across the borders that halted the investors from investment which created the economic instability in the state.

Tajiks President Emomali Rahmon and Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan has signed Defense agreement through with Pakistan and Tajikistan not only promoted their bilateral relation but provide the chance of fulfilling the requirement of weapons for Dushanbe and consumer for the selling of Islamabad manufactured weapon.²⁰

¹⁷ Solod, D. A guide to the violent unrest in Uzbekistan’s Karakalpakstan region. *Open Democracy*. (2022).

¹⁸ Rossi, R. CIS Countries Strengthened Military Cooperation. *specialeurasia*. (2022).

¹⁹ Pikulicka-Wilczewska, A. Ukraine war: Is Central Asia loosening ties with Russia? *AlJazeera*. (2022).

²⁰ Syed, B. S. Tajikistan to buy weapons from Pakistan. *The Dawn*. (June 2021).

Pakistan has held military exercises with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan with an aim to "develop and bolster coordination between the two armies" in the domain of counter-terrorism. It has provided training and equipment to strengthen border security as well. Closer coordination can help monitor and curb the flow of militants, weapons and narcotics into the region.²¹

Kazakh military personnel have attended bilateral counter terrorism exercise conducted in Pakistan, Pabbi back in 2017 and other exercise was conducted in Oskemen in 2019. Dostarym-2017 and Dostarym-2019 courses on peacekeeping operations provided a conducive environment to learn the tactics and strategies to counter terrorism and learn from each other experiences. (2nd Pakistan-Kazakhstan Joint counter Terrorism exercise "Dostarym-2019" continues in Oskemen, 2023)

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) also brings opportunities and risks related to security. Gwadar Port in Pakistan provides access to sea trade routes for the landlocked Central Asian states. But its proximity to volatile areas like Baluchistan and Afghanistan demands joint safeguards for investments and trade flows.

Cultural Connections: Leveraging Soft Power for Closer Ties

Leveraging Pakistan's rich cultural heritage and influence to strengthen ties with Central Asia through soft power is a promising strategy. Pakistan may enhance its diplomatic and economic ties to its Eastern Asian neighbors by fostering goodwill and trust through three channels: media, common history, and religious ties. Pakistan with Central Asia have long been connected by culture.

Pakistan has centuries-old cultural, religious, and linguistic links to Central Asia. Reestablishing these ties and developing a relationship based on trust can create a long-lasting strategic alliance. Pakistan was impacted by migrations of Persian, Turkic, and Mongol people from Central Asia because it was the entry point to South Asia. Due to these relationships, cultures, ethnic groups, and customs from both regions came together to form a fusion that is still present today. Relationships can be strengthened by showcasing these cultural overlaps through soft power diplomacy. Pakistan, home to more than 200 million people, presents a sizable market for commodities from Central Asia as well as a wealth of business skills. Strengthening academic exchanges, traveling, arts, and sports can facilitate more people-to-people links between Pakistan with Central Asia. Events showcasing Pakistan's rich variety of cultures to Central Asians include festivals, concerts, and exhibitions.

Islam has linked Pakistan and Central Asia for over a millennium. Pakistan can leverage its position as an influential Muslim nation to build religious cooperation. Facilitating exchanges between religious scholars, sponsoring students to study Islam in Pakistan, and promoting Sufi teachings are ways to cultivate these ties.

Sharing media and entertainment is an overlooked soft power tool. Promoting Pakistani dramas, films, TV channels and music in Central Asia can boost cultural affinity between populations. Co-producing movies, TV shows and songs blending Pakistani and Central Asian influences may resonate widely with audiences in both regions. Pakistan's vibrant media industry is an untapped resource for cultural diplomacy.

²¹ Latif, A. Pakistan-Kazakhstan joint military exercise begins. *Asia Pacific*. (2021).

The Future of Pakistan-Central Asia Relations: Prospects and Challenges

The future of Pakistan-Central Asia relations looks bright but Political instability and security concerns in Afghanistan pose risks to regional connectivity projects like TAPI and CASA-1000. By pooling resources and sharing intelligence, Pakistan and Central Asia can gain stability and prosperity. Their strategic location at the crossroads of East and West Asia gives them the chance to become a trade and transit hub connecting economies from the Persian Gulf to East Asia. Defense and economic strategic partnerships can secure the entire region's long-term peace and growth.

Pakistan's "Vision Central Asia" policy aims to strengthen economic and cultural links through trade, connectivity, and tourism. There is much potential for Pakistan and Central Asia to build economic bridges, from trade and transit to energy cooperation. With peace in Afghanistan, this region could prosper together. By learning from the past and focusing on mutually beneficial partnerships, Pakistan and Central Asia can craft a prosperous future.

The two nations should think about taking advantage of the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran and Pakistan-Iran-Turkey (ECO Train) train connections. Establishing a connection between these train lines would be consistent with the China-Pakistan economic corridor initiative and Kazakhstan's Nuryl Zhol Economic Policy. Furthermore, Kazakhstan belongs to ECO. China's Xinjiang province along the Karakoram Highway in Kazakhstan can be used to construct the Khorgos-Gwadar axis if ECO Train is connected to Kazakhstan's Khorgos dry port. This would improve regional connection between Central and South Asia and give landlocked Central Asia the quickest path to the warm seas of Pakistani ports.

The Central Asian states also need alternate trade routes as they aim to diversify from heavy economic dependence on Russia and China. Improving regional connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia is a key priority. Major infrastructure projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provide opportunities to link Pakistan to Central Asia and beyond. CPEC road and rail links could be extended to Central Asian countries, facilitating the movement of goods, people, and energy across the region. Direct flights and relaxed visa regimes can also boost people-to-people ties between Pakistan and Central Asia, leading to greater cultural exchange and tourism.

Student exchange programs and academic collaborations between universities are a great way to build these bridges between societies. The region's youth stand to gain the most from this cooperation. Young entrepreneurs and small businesses in Pakistan and Central Asia can collaborate, gain exposure to new markets, and access technology and skills. With over 60% of Pakistan's population under 30, connecting youth and helping them find economic opportunity is key to the country's prosperity.

Economic limitations and inadequate financial resources are the chief impediments in achieving goals of building unified ECO community. Massive resources and capital is required to construct the infrastructure for communication which is impossible for Pakistan as well as Central Asian States as both need foreign investment to stabilize their economy and completion of their developmental projects. Arab Countries are keen to develop good ties with Central Asian states and willing to invest in developing basic infrastructure and Pakistan can be act as a facilitator. Establishing the Kazakhstan Mansion in Lahore to provide one-stop shopping for visas, commerce, tourism, educational institutions, and other

matters is Kazakhstan's goal in Pakistan. Closer economic integration drives political cooperation among both entities. The future of Pakistan-Central Asia ties depends on sustained high-level dialog and win-win policies that serve the development goals of all sides. With the right vision and political will, these culturally linked nations have the opportunity to build economic bridges and shape a common destiny. With a shared vision for greater regional cooperation, Pakistan and Central Asia can work together to build economic bridges and unlock their full potential as trading and connectivity hubs in the heart of Asia. These former allies can attain prosperity through regional integration by overcoming current obstacles. "Central Asian states may offer Islamabad the strategic breadth that we lack," an official statement emphasized.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan's relations with Central Asia have forged new paths over time. Political commitment and security are necessary for sustainable prosperity, but a region that is prosperous and integrated can be established by putting an emphasis on society, entertainment, schooling, especially shared prosperity. Creating a prosperous and peaceful future together is possible for Pakistan and Central Asia if they are open minded, understanding each other and are visionary. The two regions comprehend the necessity of strong cooperation and economic integration which could not be otherwise despite some slight fluctuations. Following the China Belt and Road Initiative initiatives, Pakistan and Central Asia are now linked, and are seen to have more synergies across all areas. Economic powerhouses are supposed to emerge from the historical and cultural affiliations between Pakistan and Central Asia, as well as enhancing trade, investments, and social networks. There may be challenges that come with geopolitical changes, but there are also opportunities if both work together towards development. These nations would become very successful in economic aspects given the necessary political goodwill and legal support. Central Asia and Pakistan should now come together to determine their common future. A limitless potential lies ahead should they decide to open the next page concerning this territory and put greater emphasis on regional integration.

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