



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Pakistan's Relations with the Central Asian States: Opportunities and Challenges**

Umm-e- Rubab<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Rizwan Ali\*<sup>2</sup> Kashif Iqbal Rana<sup>2</sup>

1. Visiting Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
2. M Phil Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
3. M. Phil, Department of Political Science,, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

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**ABSTRACT**

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**\*Corresponding Author**

Rizwan.ali2136@gmail.com

The disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) caused five Central Asian states. The value of the Central Asian region increased, not decreased, due to the emergence of newly five CARs. Central Asian states are rich with natural resources and Pakistan considered it a chance and tried to cash its brotherhood identity to reach Central Asian states. Pakistan adopted a realistic approach towards the Central Asian region and extended its neighbourhood beyond South Asia. This research paper explores potentials that would be beneficial to enhance economic ties between Pakistan and CARs. Central Asian states have large reserves of natural objects and Pakistan has a vital geostrategic location. Pakistan can connect Central Asian states with the Middle East, Africa and other countries of Asia. Central Asian republics want to enhance their ties with Pakistan to extend their trade route via Gawadar port to the world. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the game-changer project in the region. Central Asian states can get benefit by using this mega project. This paper explores the opportunities for the CARs and Pakistan to enhance trade ties and bring durable peace to the region. Pakistan is keen to extend its wings to Central Asia and CARs also want to use the port of Gawadar to nurture its trade with the world.

**Introduction**

Central Asia has strong connections with the South Asian region. Most of the rulers migrated from Central Asia and governed the South Asian region and both areas are connected through religion and culture. Central Asian countries consist of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Central Asia and South Asia share economic and cultural ties mainly with Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. The Central Asian region is rich with natural resources like oil and gas. World

powers are keen to explore this region to get untapped natural resources. The Central Asian region is facing numerous challenges despite having immense natural benefits. CARs do not have direct access to the sea route and the sea route plays a crucial role in enhancing the trade volume of a region. On the other hand, South Asian countries, especially Pakistan, shares a long coastal line of approximately 750km in Balochistan that increases the importance of Pakistan (Shahrukh, Hussain, Azeem, & Khan, 2020). It's a vital opportunity for the Central Asian states to get attached to Pakistan to enhance its trade volume with the whole world. The disintegration of the USSR in 1991 gave birth to five states and newly born states in Central Asia enhanced the importance of this region. Central Asia can facilitate South Asia, especially Pakistan, in energy and industrial raw material. Turkmenistan occupies a vital position among Central Asian states due to its gas reserves and has the world's fifth-biggest reserves of gas (Chazan, 2008). Turkmenistan is also having a large number of oil reserves. Central Asian states with an abundance of energy items can facilitate Pakistan to overcome its energy shortcomings. Pakistan provides the most favourable trade route to the CARs. Gawadar port has great significance and can play a vital role in enhancing trade opportunities in Central Asia. Central Asian states can use Gawadar port as a transit corridor between Central Asia and the other regions of the world, especially South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Every route to CARs must cross the war-affected Afghanistan. Violence in Afghanistan does not favour the betterment of the Central Asian region. Although Pakistan has made different attempts to develop strong connections with CARs, Pakistani leadership has explained the importance of Gawadar port for the CARs. Almost all the Central Asian states are showing great interest in Gawadar port. CPEC is a great blessing for CARs and even Russia to expand their wings to the Indian Ocean (Ahmed, 2018). Pakistan's geostrategic position enables it to attract the attention of the CARs and Russia. China will invest a considerable amount in Pakistan on different projects under CPEC. Pakistan's economic indicators are getting better day by day, and Pakistan is attracting the regional countries to invest in various projects in Pakistan. This paper focuses on Pakistan's ties with Central Asian states and the challenges and opportunities for both sides.

This research paper enables readers to understand Pakistan's relations with Central Asian states, challenges and opportunities. The researcher uses a qualitative research design to complete his research paper. The writer has used different tools for data collection. The author has searched various educational institutions to get relevant data on his topic to conclude. This research paper has great significance in terms of CARs and Pakistan's economic growth. The Central Asian region has abundant natural resources and Pakistan can provide them with the easiest route to expand their wings. The writer has clear objectives to enable people to understand the potential of CARs has in terms of energy resources. This paper also helps to understand problems and prospects to enhance Pakistan's ties with CARs. The writer took help from existing material like books, journals and Newspapers to finalize his research work. The author also took help from online materials to get related data to his topic. This research paper is valuable to understand CARs and Pakistan relations in the modern era.

## **Literature Review**

Prospects of Pakistan- Central Asia Economic Relations by Umbreen Javaid and Naheeda Naseem explain the commonalities among Central Asian and South Asian states. The central Asian region shares a long history of religious, cultural and economic ties with South Asian countries, especially India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Central Asian countries are rich with natural wealth and have a large population but weak an economic perspective. CARs have no direct access to the sea, which is the biggest reason CARs cannot reach out to the outer world. The writers also explain the geographical importance of Pakistan. Pakistan has extended coastal areas with developed ports. Pakistan can provide the shortest and the easiest route to Central Asian states through Afghanistan to Pakistan. The writers highlight the importance of CARs due to their hidden wealth and highlight Pakistan's geographical importance (Javaid & Naseem, 2014).

Pakistan's Interests / Opportunities & Constraints in the Central Asian states by Naheeda Khatoon and Isma Younes discuss the Russian efforts to access warm waters in the Arabian sea. The writers also discuss the British strategies to counter Russian manoeuvres. British rulers realized that Russian efforts to get a hold on South Asian parts were the real threat to their colonial crown in South Asia and the British prevented them from getting into South Asia. Russian efforts to get access to warm waters and British efforts to prevent them from doing so is called "the Great Game." After the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, five states in the Central Asian region emerged as newly born states rich with natural resources but no direct access to the sea. The writers emphasize the importance of Pakistan due to its geographical location (Khatoon & Younes, 2019).

In the Analysis of Regional Bilateral Trade Between Pakistan and Central Asian Republics, Saleem Khan, Sher Ali and Saima Urooge discuss trade potential between Pakistan and Central Asian states. The Central Asian region consists of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Although Central Asian republics rich with hidden resources are still far behind in the economic race. Central Asian states have not achieved much success on the financial side despite having big oil and gas reserves in the region. The writers explain the geographical importance of Pakistan and CARs urge to build strong relations with Pakistan. Pakistan enjoys a crucial geostrategic position in the South Asian region. Pakistan shares a long border with Afghanistan in the west. CARs are always keen to establish strong ties with Pakistan to get world exposure. CARs have abundant natural resources but are economically weak due to internal and geographical issues (Khan, Ali, & Urooge, 2019).

Changing Geopolitical Dynamics in Central Asia: Causes and Effects by Sarwat Rauf discusses the geostrategic significance of Central Asian republics and their attraction towards the world dominance states. The Central Asian region is rich with untapped natural objects. World powers are very keen to get a stronghold in Central Asian states to explore the hidden blessings of nature. The writer wants to show us the world powers' initiatives to obtain natural resources from Central Asia. However, CARs and the world powers cannot explore things without bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been at war for the last four decades. After the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, Central Asian republics got

independence and hoped that things would be in their favour in the coming years, but still, a lot of work is needed. The author highlights the relations among CARs and other states of the region (Rauf, 2017).

Taliban (Militant Islam, Oil Fundamentalism in Central Asia) by Ahmed Rashid explains the social, political and religious culture of the Central Asian region. The Central Asian area is rich with untapped natural resources and CARs are rich in oil, gas and iron. Central Asian states got independence from the USSR in 1991. World powers always tried to enter this region to explore the untapped natural reserves. However, the Central Asian region could not flourish due to instability in the neighbourhood. Afghanistan has been in the war for the last 40 years. Central Asian states suffered a lot due to the militancy in Afghanistan. The author explains the hostility in Afghanistan and its spillover effect on the Central Asian states (Rashid, 2010).

The writers wrote various articles and books on the Central Asian region. CARs have a significant place in natural resources, and the world wants to explore this patch of land. There is needed more work to be done on Pakistan relations with CARs. Pakistan also has a great geostrategic location in the region. This paper points out the challenges and opportunities for Pakistan and Central Asian states' relations in the modern era.

### **Pakistan and Central Asian States Relations: Opportunities and Challenges**

Central Asian region and South Asian region share centuries-old relations. Central Asia shares commonalities in cultural, religious and economic terms with South Asian countries. Sufism influenced the South Asian region, especially the Indian Sub-Continent influenced by the saints from the Central Asian region. The ancient invaders came from Central Asia and governed the Indian Sub-Continent for a long.

USSR disintegrated in 1991 and five states got independence in the Central Asian region. These states are Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, rich with hidden energy resources. CARs attract many countries from the region and the world due to their untapped natural resources and location (Ashurov, Othman, Rosman, & Haron, 2020). Central Asian states could not stabilize their economies despite having many natural reserves. Central Asian republics faced numerous challenges right after their independence from USSR in 1991. CARs face challenges like political instability and Islamic militancy in the region, and the most important is the lack of a sea route (VOA, 2009). Central Asian states desperately needed a safe passage for pipeline routes to explore the outer world. Pakistan has great significance in this regard. Pakistan enjoys a long coastal line with developed ports and provides the nearest route to Central Asia. Central Asian states show great interest in Gawadar port (Aamir, 2021). Islamabad has been trying to become an important regional player for a long time due to its strategic position. Turkmenistan has the biggest gas reserves in Central Asia. TAPI is a gas pipeline project among Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. TAPI project will be helpful to overcome the energy problems of Pakistan (Steiner, 2019). CARs have always taken an important place in South Asian and world political history. CARs and Pakistan can get benefits from each other. Both sides have been blessed by nature. Pakistan has a

great geostrategic location, and CARs have abundant natural resources. CARs and Pakistan can cooperate in cultural, social and political perspectives. CARs can use developed ports of Pakistan to expand their trade ties to Asia, Africa and the Middle Eastern region (Amin, 1994). CARs importance depends upon its geographical position and abundance of natural reserves. After the Independence of Central Asian states from the USSR, Pakistan tried to see some strategic depth to tackle Indian aggression. Newly emerged states in Central Asia provided a chance to Pakistan to enhance relations with them. Pakistan always remained keen to enhance ties with CARs in the defence sector. Pakistan has recently signed MoUs with Tajikistan to enhance defence ties during the visit of the Tajik President in June 2021 (Dawn, 2021). Due to geostrategic location, historic and economic perspective, regional connectivity is necessary to boost the living standards of the common people. Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) positively enhances trade ties with regional countries (Raza, 2021). Peace in Afghanistan is compulsory to enhance regional trade. Regional countries are trying to bring durable peace and stability to Afghanistan. Peace in Afghanistan favours all regional countries to come closer to each other and eradicate poverty and terrorism. Pakistan and all other regional countries are trying their best to achieve durable peace after the peace accord between America and the Taliban signed on 29 February 2020 (Mustafa, Junaid, Khan, & Wakil, 2020). Pakistan is ready to provide the easiest route to the Central Asian states once peace prevails in Afghanistan. CARs can connect with the whole world via ports of Pakistan. Pakistan wants to enhance its economic links with Central Asian countries. Pakistan is very keen to provide transit services to the landlocked region of Central Asia. Pakistan's geographical location makes it valuable for CARs from other South Asian countries. Uzbekistan has started its trade via Gawadar port. Uzbekistan is going to build a warehouse at Gawadar. Pakistan and Uzbekistan have inked various defence, agriculture, textile, energy, and information technology agreements during a virtual summit held in April 2021 (Jamal, 2021). Pakistan and Central Asian states are willing to increase cooperation in all segments. Peace is the most important factor to enhance trade between both regions. Afghanistan's turmoil is the most disturbing element for Pakistan and Central Asian states. War in Afghanistan stops the growth within the country and affects the neighbouring states. Pakistan, Iran and Central Asian states are directly affected by the war in Afghanistan. War in Afghanistan has a spillover effect on the CARs and other neighbouring states. Different militant organizations are working in the Central Asian region. The militant groups have safe havens in Afghanistan. Peace in Afghanistan can control the militancy in the Central Asian region. Pakistan is hosting over 4 million Afghan refugees. If peace prevails in Afghanistan, then refugees can come back to their home country and it will be helpful for Pakistan's economy (Mustafa, Yaseen, & Junaid, 2020). Pakistan wants to attach with CARs, but it is difficult to do so quickly due to its bad economic condition. Pakistan's economy runs on International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and other friendly countries. Pakistan was on the verge of bankruptcy back in 2018; Prime minister Imran Khan visited friendly countries UAE, Saudi Arabia and China to get some support to stabilize the country's economy (Gul, 2018). The poor economic condition also hurts Pakistan on various occasions. Tehran, Ankara and some other Middle Eastern states have greatly influenced on Central Asian region and it posed a clear challenge for Islamabad to establish a stronghold in the Central Asian region (Esfandiari, 2005). World powers are also keeping an eye on the Central Asian region due to its large reserves of natural resources. Pakistan cannot ignore the Indian factor

in the Central Asian region. India also wants to get benefit from the natural resources of CARs. Islamabad must adopt a strong policy towards Central Asia by keeping its future aims in mind. Lack of infrastructure is another problem for Pakistan to reach out to Central Asian states. Although Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan have signed a rail project of 573 km from Mazar Sharif to Peshawar through Kabul (Ollard, 2021). Afghanistan's internal position is a big worry for completing this project. Peace in Afghanistan is necessary for the economic growth of Central Asia. Pakistan must develop diplomatic ties with Central Asian states to create a friendly atmosphere. Islamabad should facilitate CARs to use Gawadar port for transit trade. Central Asian states have the potential and interest to enhance cooperation with Pakistan in economics, defence and agriculture.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan can utilize geographical location to enhance economic ties with Central Asian republics. CARs are also willing to use Pakistan's port to connect with the outer world as a transit route. However, there are different challenges facing Pakistan and CARs to enhance trade volume. Russia greatly influences Central Asian states and it is difficult for any state to get a stronghold in the Central Asian region. Pakistan had tense relations with Russia, but now both countries are coming closer. Moscow is also willing to construct a gas pipeline to overcome the energy needs of Pakistan. The Afghan war is the major hurdle in the way of regional prosperity. Although America has signed a peace agreement with the Taliban, the chances of peace in Afghanistan are dim. A civil war is knocking at the door of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of American troops. Peace is the ultimate need to explore the Central Asian region. Relations among America, Russia and China also affect the Central Asian region. Pakistan must try to support all the segments of Afghanistan to bring durable peace and Islamabad also keep balance in relations among world powers. Pakistan must engage Central Asian states diplomatically and facilitate CARs to use Gawadar port as a transit route. Pakistan must enhance cooperation in the fields of defence and energy. CPEC is the game changer program Central Asian states can benefit from through CEPC and Pakistan should convince them to join it. Although it is not easy for Pakistan to get a stronghold in Central Asia, Islamabad must use diplomatic channels to engage CARs and Russia.

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