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Central Asian Quest: Pakistan's Vision for Energy Corridors, Trade, and Strategic Depth

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Pakistan's multi-dimensional Central Asian Quest as a strategic endeavor to transform its geographic proximity into geoeconomic advantage through energy corridors, enhanced trade, and strategic depth. Situated at the crossroads of South Asia and Central Asia, Pakistan envisions itself as a natural bridge offering the shortest route for landlocked Central Asian republics to access warm-water ports and global markets. The study traces the evolution of Pakistan-Central Asia relations since 1991, analyzes flagship energy initiatives such as CASA-1000 and TAPI, and explores their integration with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. It further investigates the security dimensions, including counter-terrorism cooperation and Afghan stability, alongside Pakistan's geopolitical balancing among major powers and its active role in regional organizations like the SCO, ECO, and CAREC. By adopting an integrated framework combining geoeconomics, realism, and regionalism, the article identifies critical gaps in existing literature and highlights both opportunities and persistent challenges ranging from infrastructure deficits to great power competition. The analysis underscores that successful implementation of this vision could significantly enhance Pakistan's energy security, diversify its trade routes, generate transit revenues, and elevate its regional influence. However, realizing this potential requires sustained diplomatic engagement, political stability in Afghanistan, robust institutional mechanisms, and pragmatic navigation of competing international interests. In an era of shifting global supply chains and Eurasian connectivity initiatives, Pakistan's Central Asian engagement emerges as a pivotal element in its quest for economic resilience and strategic relevance in the 21st century.

Keywords: Central Asia, Pakistan Foreign Policy, Energy Corridors, Geoeconomics, Strategic Depth, Regional Connectivity.

Introduction

Central Asia has reemerged as one of the most strategically and economically vital regions in the 21st century. Endowed with vast reserves of hydrocarbons, hydropower potential, rare earth minerals, and critical transit routes, the five post-Soviet republics command growing attention from major powers seeking energy security and diversified supply chains (Dar, 2010). Their geographic position at the heart of Eurasia positions them as a pivotal node connecting East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Despite being landlocked, these states possess enormous untapped economic potential that can reshape regional power dynamics

when linked effectively to warm water ports and global markets. Scholars have increasingly highlighted how Central Asia's resource wealth and location amplify its role in contemporary geoeconomic competition, particularly amid shifting global energy transitions and supply chain disruptions (Rubab et al., 2022).

Pakistan stands uniquely poised to serve as a natural bridge between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Arabian Sea. With its long coastline along the Arabian Sea and proximity to the resource rich republics through shared borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan offers the shortest and most cost effective route for Central Asian states to access international maritime trade (Zuridinov, 2022). The development of Gwadar Port under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor further enhances this connectivity potential, transforming Pakistan's geography from a perceived liability into a strategic asset. This locational advantage enables Pakistan to function as a gateway for Central Asian energy exports and imports while providing landlocked countries reliable access to South Asian and Middle Eastern markets. Recent analyses underscore how Pakistan's coastal infrastructure and transit corridors can unlock substantial mutual gains, allowing Central Asian republics to reduce dependence on northern routes and diversify their external linkages (Maqsood, 2025).

Pakistan's Central Asian Quest represents a sophisticated multi-dimensional foreign policy and economic vision that integrates energy security, trade expansion, and strategic engagement. Successive governments have pursued this northward orientation through initiatives such as enhanced Economic Cooperation Organization frameworks, participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and targeted bilateral outreach. At its core, this quest seeks to convert Pakistan's geographic proximity into tangible geoeconomic strength. Pakistan aims to transform its geographical location into geoeconomic strength through energy corridors, enhanced trade, and strategic depth in Central Asia. Key projects like CASA 1000 for electricity transmission from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and the proposed TAPI gas pipeline from Turkmenistan exemplify this ambition, promising to address Pakistan's chronic energy deficits while generating transit revenues and fostering deeper interdependence. By building robust energy corridors and trade linkages, Islamabad envisions not only economic uplift but also strategic depth that bolsters regional influence and resilience amid great power rivalries (Sadat, 2015). This integrated approach signals a deliberate shift toward geoeconomics, where connectivity and mutual prosperity take precedence in reshaping Pakistan's regional posture.

Literature Review

Pakistan Central Asia relations evolved significantly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 when Islamabad promptly recognized the newly independent republics and initiated high level diplomatic engagements to capitalize on shared cultural religious and historical ties. Early policy focused on political outreach economic cooperation and transit potential yet progress remained modest due to persistent instability in Afghanistan and limited infrastructure. Successive Pakistani governments pursued multiple agreements in trade culture and energy but implementation lagged amid security compulsions and competing external influences. Scholars document how Pakistan viewed Central Asia as an avenue for breaking diplomatic isolation gaining economic access and enhancing strategic options while Central Asian states sought diversified partnerships beyond Russian dominance (Khan, 2009; Gill, 2023). Over the decades relations matured through platforms such as the Economic Cooperation Organization and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation although tangible outcomes in connectivity often fell short of initial optimism. Key scholarly works on the New

Great Game in Central Asia frequently position Pakistan as an important player in the contest for energy resources transit routes and regional influence among major powers including Russia China the United States and India (Rashid, 2009). Analysts frame this renewed geopolitical competition as a struggle for control over hydrocarbons pipelines and strategic corridors where Pakistan offers the shortest route to warm waters via Gwadar and Karachi ports. Literature highlights how external actors pursue divergent agendas that sometimes align with and sometimes constrain Pakistani objectives. Rashid popularized the concept of resource driven rivalry while subsequent studies examine Pakistan role in balancing great power interests to secure energy imports and transit revenues (Khan, 2025; Farid, 2025). These works underscore the interplay between geopolitics and emerging geoeconomic realities shaping Islamabad policy calculus in the region.

Existing literature on energy politics and regional connectivity extensively covers flagship projects such as CASA 1000 for hydropower transmission from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Pakistan and Afghanistan and the Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India gas pipeline aimed at exporting Central Asian gas to South Asian markets. Researchers also analyze the potential linkage between China Pakistan Economic Corridor and Central Asian states through extended rail road and port infrastructure that could unlock trade in minerals agriculture and manufactured goods (Sadat, 2015; Zurdinov, 2022). Studies emphasize the substantial economic benefits including addressing Pakistan chronic energy deficits generating transit fees and expanding bilateral trade volumes particularly with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. However many analyses remain project specific and highlight recurring obstacles such as Afghan security challenges financing gaps and diplomatic tensions (Saleem, 2018; Khetrani, 2019). Trade potential receives attention yet evaluations often treat energy corridors and commercial linkages in isolation rather than as mutually reinforcing elements. A critical gap persists in the literature regarding an integrated approach that simultaneously examines energy corridors enhanced trade and strategic depth from Pakistan perspective (Javaid et al., 2024). While individual studies address specific projects or bilateral ties few synthesize these dimensions into a cohesive framework that captures how geoeconomic gains can translate into long term strategic resilience. Theoretical frameworks employed in the broader discourse include geoeconomics which prioritizes economic interdependence and connectivity over pure military power realism which focuses on security dilemmas and power balancing and regionalism which explores institutional cooperation through organizations such as ECO and SCO. This study bridges the identified gap by adopting an integrated lens combining these frameworks to assess how Pakistan can convert geographic proximity into multifaceted advantage (Maqsood, 2025; Amin, 1994). Such synthesis offers deeper analytical insight into policy options for sustainable regional engagement.

Study Rationale and Significance

This study is both timely and significant because existing literature, while rich in analyzing isolated energy projects and bilateral ties, falls short of presenting a comprehensive integrated framework that captures Pakistan's multi-dimensional Central Asian Quest. In an era marked by global energy transitions, supply chain disruptions, and intensifying great power competition in Eurasia, Pakistan urgently needs to convert its unique geographic location into tangible geoeconomic strength. By systematically examining energy corridors, trade expansion, and strategic depth together, this research addresses a critical gap and offers policymakers a holistic roadmap for regional engagement. The significance lies in its potential to guide Pakistan toward enhanced energy security, diversified trade routes, reduced

economic vulnerabilities, and greater strategic influence in Central Asia. Ultimately, successful implementation of this vision can help Pakistan move beyond aid dependency, unlock new avenues for economic growth, and establish itself as a pivotal connectivity hub between Central Asia, South Asia, and the broader world.

Historical Context and Foundations of Pakistan-Central Asia Relations

Pakistan moved swiftly to engage the newly independent Central Asian Republics immediately after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. As one of the first countries to extend formal diplomatic recognition on 19 December 1991, Islamabad dispatched high level delegations including a 24 member team led by the Minister of State for Economic Affairs that toured the region in late 1991 (Rahman, 2018). Successive governments viewed the emergence of these five Muslim majority states as a historic opportunity to expand Pakistan influence beyond South Asia, secure access to energy resources, and establish reliable transit routes to warm waters. Early diplomatic efforts focused on opening embassies, signing initial agreements, and building political goodwill. Despite this proactive outreach, concrete economic and connectivity outcomes remained limited in the initial years as Pakistan grappled with domestic political transitions and shifting regional priorities. Analysts note that while emotive appeals to shared identity played a role, the primary thrust remained economic and commercial engagement aimed at positioning Pakistan as a natural gateway for the landlocked republics (Gill, 2023).

Deep cultural, religious, and historical linkages have provided the enduring foundation for Pakistan Central Asia relations. Century's old interactions along the Silk Road fostered extensive exchanges in trade, ideas, culture, and migrations, creating strong Turkic Persian and Islamic civilizational bonds (Naseem, 2016). Common Islamic faith, Sufi traditions, linguistic influences from Persian and Turkic languages, and historical ties under various empires reinforced a sense of kinship that distinguished Central Asia as part of Pakistan extended neighborhood (Khan, 2023). After 1991, Pakistani policymakers consciously leveraged these soft power assets to prioritize relations with the region, framing Central Asia not as distant foreign territory but as a natural extension of shared heritage. This civilizational connection offered strategic advantages by facilitating people to people contacts and cultural diplomacy alongside pragmatic pursuits of energy security and transit trade. Such historical and religious affinities helped soften initial post-Soviet suspicions and provided a resilient base for long term cooperation even when geopolitical hurdles emerged (Rubab et al., 2022).

Pakistan advanced several institutional initiatives to institutionalize cooperation, notably through the revitalized Economic Cooperation Organization, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation program, and its dedicated Look North Policy. The ECO expanded in 1992 to incorporate Central Asian states with the aim of boosting intra-regional trade, transport infrastructure, and technical collaboration, while CAREC, which Pakistan joined in 2010, emphasized corridor development linking the republics to Pakistani ports such as Karachi and Gwadar. The Look North Policy sought to diversify external relations by focusing on northward energy imports, expanded commerce, and strategic partnerships. However, implementation encountered formidable obstacles throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Zuridinov, 2022; Khan, 2025). Chronic instability in Afghanistan severely disrupted overland routes, persistent infrastructure deficits hampered connectivity on both sides, and continued Russian influence prompted caution among Central Asian leaders wary of over reliance on southern corridors. These structural challenges, combined with Pakistan domestic volatility

and competing great power interests, frequently constrained tangible gains despite repeated diplomatic agreements and high level visits (Amin, 1994).

Energy Corridors: Pakistan as a Future Energy Hub

Pakistan faces a persistent and widening energy demand supply gap that threatens sustained economic growth and industrial competitiveness. With rapid population increase and urbanization, electricity peak demand frequently reaches 27 to 28 gigawatts during summer months while reliable supply often falls short, resulting in load shedding and high costs for imported fuels (Naz, 2024). Primary energy consumption continues to rely heavily on imported oil and gas, exposing the economy to price volatility and balance of payments pressures. Forecasts indicate that without diversified imports and regional connectivity, the gap will intensify over the coming decades as industrial and household demand escalates. Central Asian hydropower and gas resources offer a strategic solution by providing cleaner and more affordable energy during peak seasons, enabling Pakistan to reduce dependence on expensive thermal generation and stabilize tariffs. Bridging this gap through cross border corridors is therefore essential for energy security and long term economic resilience (Saleem, 2018).

Major proposed and ongoing energy projects position Pakistan as a potential future energy hub linking resource rich Central Asia with energy deficit South Asia. The Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission Project known as CASA 1000 aims to deliver up to 1300 megawatts of surplus summer hydropower from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan through high voltage direct current lines, with Pakistan scheduled to receive 1000 megawatts. Construction has advanced significantly in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan, while work in Afghanistan resumed in late 2024 and is expected to enable commercial operations by summer 2027. The Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India gas pipeline remains another flagship initiative designed to transport up to 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually from Turkmenistan, with Pakistan allocated 14 billion cubic meters to address domestic shortages (Sadat, 2015; Zurdinov, 2022). Additional potential lies in expanded hydropower imports directly from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, integration of these Central Asian supplies with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and Gwadar Port infrastructure would create multimodal energy and transit networks, allowing Pakistan to store, process, and re-export energy while serving as a regional gateway (World Bank, 2026).

Despite promising prospects, developing these energy corridors encounters substantial legal, technical, and financial challenges that demand careful navigation. Legal frameworks for cross border power trading and gas transit require harmonized regulations on tariffs, dispute resolution, and third party access, which remain underdeveloped among participating states (Khetran, 2019). Technically, the projects involve complex high altitude terrain, long distance transmission losses, and integration with aging national grids, necessitating advanced converter stations and robust maintenance systems. Financial hurdles include massive upfront capital requirements estimated in billions of dollars, reliance on multilateral funding, and risks of cost overruns due to delays. Securing sustained investment from international lenders while managing sovereign debt constraints adds another layer of complexity for Pakistan. Overcoming these barriers calls for stronger institutional coordination and risk sharing mechanisms among stakeholders (Javaid et al., 2024).

Geopolitical dimensions further complicate the realization of these energy corridors amid competing interests of major powers. Russia seeks to maintain influence over Central Asian

energy exports through traditional northern routes, while China advances its Belt and Road connectivity that aligns with CPEC extension northward. Iran promotes alternative pipelines and electricity swaps that could bypass or compete with southern corridors, and the United States has historically supported projects that diversify away from Russian and Iranian dominance. These overlapping ambitions create both opportunities for leverage and risks of politicization, where security concerns in Afghanistan or bilateral tensions can stall progress. Pakistan must therefore pursue pragmatic diplomacy to balance great power engagement while prioritizing national energy needs and regional stability (Rashid, 2009).

Security, Geopolitics, and Regional Influence

The concept of strategic depth in Pakistan Central Asia policy has evolved from its traditional military oriented interpretation focused on Afghanistan as a rear base against potential Indian threats to a broader geoeconomic and diplomatic framework. Originally conceived during the Cold War era to secure territorial fallback options and deny adversarial influence along the western frontier, the doctrine now emphasizes creating layered resilience through economic interdependence, energy access, and political alliances with Central Asian states. In the contemporary context, strategic depth entails transforming geographic proximity into sustainable influence by fostering friendly regimes or stable partnerships that safeguard Pakistan western borders while opening northward corridors for trade and transit. This shift reflects a pragmatic adaptation to post 2021 realities where outright control has proven elusive and mutual economic benefits offer more durable leverage. By pursuing strategic depth through connectivity rather than proxy dominance, Pakistan aims to mitigate traditional vulnerabilities and project influence across Eurasia (Parkes, 2019; Maqsood, 2025).

The security dimension remains central to Pakistan engagement with Central Asia, particularly through counter terrorism cooperation, enhanced border management, and efforts to promote stability in Afghanistan. Islamabad actively seeks intelligence sharing and joint operations with Central Asian republics and Afghan authorities to neutralize threats from groups such as the Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan and Islamic State Khorasan Province that exploit porous borders. Border fencing along the Durand Line and proposed joint mechanisms for monitoring reflect attempts to strengthen physical controls while addressing cross border militancy. Stability in Afghanistan is viewed as indispensable because persistent chaos disrupts transit routes and allows sanctuaries for anti-Pakistan elements. Recent trilateral and quadrilateral forums involving Pakistan, China, and Central Asian states have prioritized counter terrorism coordination to prevent spillover that could destabilize the wider region. However, divergent threat perceptions with the Taliban led government continue to strain cooperation and highlight the limits of unilateral approaches (Tanaka, 2026; Khetrans, 2019).

Geopolitical balancing constitutes a sophisticated element of Pakistan strategy as it navigates relations with Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran within the Central Asian Theater (Nitza-Makowska, 2025). Close alignment with China through the Belt and Road Initiative and CPEC extension provides economic backing and diplomatic cover for northward outreach while Russia offers opportunities for diversified security partnerships including joint exercises and counter terrorism initiatives that reduce over reliance on any single power. Turkey complements these ties through cultural affinity and trilateral formats that promote alternative transit routes, whereas Iran presents both competitive and cooperative dynamics depending on pipeline politics and border security. This multifactor diplomacy enables Pakistan to hedge against great power rivalries and extract maximum advantage from competing interests

without alienating key partners. Such balancing requires careful calibration to avoid entrapment in proxy contests while advancing core objectives of connectivity and influence (Fayyaz, 2023).

Pakistan leverages its active membership in regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Economic Cooperation Organization, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation program to amplify its voice and institutionalize engagement with Central Asia. Full SCO membership since 2017 has facilitated security dialogues, counter terrorism frameworks through the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, and economic cooperation platforms that align with Pakistan connectivity ambitions. The ECO serves as a longstanding vehicle for trade and infrastructure projects linking Pakistan ports to Central Asian markets, while CAREC focuses on corridor development that positions Karachi and Gwadar as vital gateways (Khetran, 2019). Participation in the OIC adds a cultural and religious dimension that reinforces soft power. Through these platforms Pakistan advances multilateral norms favoring stability, non-interference in internal affairs, and collective development, thereby enhancing its legitimacy as a responsible regional actor (Aslam, 2021).

The long term vision positions Pakistan as a pivotal state bridging Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East by converting its geographic location into an indispensable connectivity node (Maqsood, 2025). This pivot state role envisions Gwadar and associated infrastructure serving as the southern anchor for Eurasian trade flows while fostering integrated energy and transport networks that benefit landlocked republics. Achieving this status demands sustained investment in stability, infrastructure, and diplomatic trust building to overcome historical mistrust and external disruptions. If realized, such a role would elevate Pakistan from a peripheral actor to a middle power capable of shaping regional agendas, generating transit revenues, and enhancing national security through interdependence (Zuridinov, 2022). Success hinges on translating institutional participation and bilateral outreach into tangible outcomes that deliver mutual prosperity and reduce conflict drivers across interconnected subregions.

Conclusion

Pakistan's Central Asian Quest represents a bold and forward-looking vision that seeks to fundamentally reshape the country's economic destiny and strategic posture by converting its geographic location into enduring geoeconomic strength. Through carefully crafted energy corridors, expanded trade linkages, and deliberate pursuit of strategic depth, Pakistan aims to emerge as a vital connectivity hub linking the resource-rich republics of Central Asia with the energy-hungry markets of South Asia and the maritime gateways of the Arabian Sea. The successful realization of flagship projects such as CASA-1000 for hydropower transmission and TAPI for natural gas supply, along with deeper integration of Central Asian energy resources with CPEC infrastructure and Gwadar Port, holds immense potential to address Pakistan's chronic energy deficits, generate substantial transit revenues, create thousands of employment opportunities, and reduce heavy dependence on traditional aid and volatile remittances. Beyond immediate economic gains, this quest opens critical avenues for enhanced security cooperation, effective counter-terrorism coordination, and greater regional influence by fostering deep interdependence that discourages conflict and builds collective resilience against external shocks and global uncertainties. However, transforming this ambitious vision into reality demands sustained high-level political will, pragmatic and nimble diplomacy to navigate complex great power rivalries, massive infrastructure

investment, and above all, long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan, which remains the weakest link in the entire connectivity chain. Without effectively addressing these critical enablers, the promise of strategic depth and meaningful economic integration risks remaining largely aspirational rather than transformative.

In an increasingly multipolar world where economic connectivity increasingly defines power and influence, Pakistan stands at a historic crossroads. By prioritizing geoeconomic instruments over purely geopolitical maneuvering and by investing in trust-based, mutually beneficial partnerships across Central Asia, Islamabad has the opportunity to position itself as an indispensable pivot state bridging Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. This role would allow Pakistan not only to diversify its economic partnerships and enhance national energy security but also to elevate its diplomatic stature as a confident middle power capable of shaping regional agendas instead of merely reacting to them. The coming decade will prove decisive in determining whether Pakistan can successfully seize this strategic opening to break entrenched cycles of economic vulnerability, security dilemmas, and external dependence. Ultimately, the Central Asian Quest transcends pipelines, electricity lines, and trade statistics. It embodies a comprehensive effort to redefine Pakistan's place in the emerging Eurasian order through visionary leadership, institutional resilience, consistent policy execution, and strategic foresight. If pursued with clarity and commitment, this northward orientation could mark a generational shift, enabling Pakistan to harness its geography as a source of strength and secure a more prosperous and influential position in the 21st century regional architecture.

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