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Pakistan's Potential to Capitalize on Sea Trade for Central Asia

Anees Muhammad Khan¹

PhD Scholar, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences,
Bahria University, Pakistan

Correspondence: cdraanees@gmail.com

Adam Saud²

Professor, Dean Faculty of Humanities & Social
Sciences, Bahria University, Pakistan

Email: asaud.buic@bahria.edu.pk

Ahsan Saeed³

PhD Scholar, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences,
Bahria University, Pakistan

Email: ahsan.muhammadsaeed@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper examines how Karachi, Port Qasim and Gwadar can be able to support CAR trade, providing shorter, cost effective routes, in comparison with those in Russian, Iranian and Chinese, supported by projects like CPEC, CAREC, QTTA, the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway project as well as associated deals. It evaluates port capacity, the hinterland connectivity, and the Pakistan and CAR trade trends and sectoral export profiles in the recent past and determines the key opportunities in transit, transshipment and value added logistics. Simultaneously, it also outlines the major limitations, such as the lack of security in Afghanistan and in Baluchistan, infrastructural and rail bottlenecks, governance and regulatory challenges, and poor public-private relations in the logistics and shipping industry. The article proposes a step by step policy and investment map. It also involves a regional ocean governance and blue economy framework based on SDGs, green-port and a Pakistan-CAR Blue Economy Forum. Thereby, aligning the standards and harmonize the development of the corridor. It concludes that, having proper reforms in time, improved connectivity and security of the corridors, Pakistan is indeed capable of making its ports the maritime port of choice of the Central Asia.

Keywords: CPEC, CAREC, QTTA, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan.



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Introduction

The Central Asian Region (CAR) comprises the landlocked countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In spite of having vast oil, gas, and other resources, its sea transportation has always been a problem. Due to its close traditional historical alliance, first with the USSR and now with Russia, its trade is mostly conducted through Russia. However, it is not receiving its due dividend because of the distant routes. Pakistani ports of Gwadar, Karachi, and Port Qasim suit

The CAR states for their transit trade, as depicted in the map below ¹:



Fig 1: Map of CAR countries

Pakistan's geostrategic location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East positions it as a natural hub for regional trade. With investments in infrastructure under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and participation in initiatives like the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program, \$51 billion has been invested by CAREC in transport, trade, and energy projects till Dec 2023². Pakistan is working to transform this potential into a reality while cognizant of infrastructure gaps, political instability in Afghanistan, and competition from rival routes. Notwithstanding, there is immense potential for Pakistan's ports to serve Central Asian trade in light of recent policy initiatives by Pakistan. Such dynamics render the changing role of Pakistan not only economically relevant, but also of strategic importance in the larger regional connectivity modes. Theoretically, the new gateway role of Pakistan can be attributed to the logic of Network Theory because the closer the distance and the more powerful the corridors, the more central it is in the regional trade networks. Simultaneously, the roles of institutions like CPEC, CAREC, and QTTA are examples of Liberal Institutionalism,

¹ "Central Asia's Five Landlocked Republics Are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Please Give Me a Good Map Depicting CAR Countries, with Pakistan Also Seen in the Map - Google Search," accessed September 17, 2025.

² "CAREC Program," CAREC Program, n.d., accessed September 17, 2025, <https://www.carecprogram.org/>.

as a formal structure of cooperation is used to mitigate the uncertainty and foster economic interdependence over time.

Pakistan is endeavoring to connect to CAR States. In this regard, Complete operationalization of the Gwadar port is being pursued through renewed vigor. Furthermore, the inclusion of Afghanistan in CPEC is also the top priority of both Pakistan and China. The Trans-Afghan Railway project is a great initiative in this regard. Additionally, added interest in the TIR System, operationalization of the one window concept, and the Uzbekistan-Pakistan Roadmap program are clear indications of the government's resolve to connect the region to Pakistan through its hinterland to its sea ports.

The Ministry of Maritime Affairs (MoMA) is taking concrete steps to connect the CAR states to Pakistani ports. Pakistan and Uzbekistan have recently agreed on the formation of a Joint Working Group (JWG) to establish a trans-regional trade framework linking Central Asia with the North Arabian Sea. The main goal is to sustain maritime-focused connections for regional integration and ocean-based industries and resources. Reportedly, Pakistan has offered Uzbekistan to integrate its trade through ports like Gwadar and Karachi, which are financially cheap. It was further suggested that "Uzbekistan can invest in improving road infrastructure and connectivity to Gwadar port, underlining its commercial viability and alignment with global sustainability goals"³.

Linking Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan's dry ports with Pakistan's seaports via road and rail networks could potentially unlock over \$20 billion in trade. A high-level Uzbek delegation is thus due to visit Karachi soon to understand the fishery import through Karachi ports⁴.

The government is also working to ensure that the Gwadar port is fully operationalized. In this regard, China is the main stakeholder. Recently, in August 2025, Gwadar Port Authority and a Chinese Firm, Xining Enterprise, signed a letter of intent (LOI) to develop Gwadar Port as a regional transshipment hub and optimize existing facilities⁵. This, if developed, would also help in fetching trade from CAR.

The government is also endeavoring to improve the road system through working with the International Road Transport Union (IRU). National Logistics Cooperation (NLC) has recently activated a lot of different corridors all across Pakistan to regional neighboring countries, including but not limited to Islamabad, Tehran, Istanbul, Pakistan-Iran, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan-Afghanistan Central Asia routes/corridors. It is also considering opening a route along the already planned CPEC corridor and extending it to the Central Asian states⁶.

Prime Minister (PM) of Pakistan on Jul 24 met the PM of Tajikistan and invited him to use Karachi port for transit trade. In this regard, rail connectivity and road infrastructure construction were also discussed/. Pakistan is also considering hosting a regional connectivity summit to discuss trade corridors with Central Asian countries⁷. Pakistan's "Vision Central Asia" policy is

³ "Ministry of Maritime Affairs," accessed September 16, 2025, <https://moma.gov.pk/NewsDetail/NmU2ZmYwMTgtYmNINy00MzYxLTkyZTEtMzc4ZDZmZGYyMTI3>.

⁴ "Ministry of Maritime Affairs."

⁵ "Ministry of Maritime Affairs."

⁶ "Pakistani Multimodal Logistics Firm NLC Joins IRU," August 13, 2025, <https://www.iru.org/news-resources/newsroom/pakistani-multimodal-logistics-firm-nlc-joins-iru>.

⁷ "PID," accessed September 16, 2025, https://pid.gov.pk/site/press_detail/25752.

a pivot through which Pakistan wants to enhance connectivity with CAR states for the financial benefit of both CAR and the Pakistani maritime sector⁸.

Thus, CAR states and Pakistan have the resolve of regional connectivity extending it till Pakistani ports for mutual benefits as depicted in the map below: ⁹. This increasingly significant alliance highlights the increased topicality of Pakistan as a potential access point to Central Asia, which is closely consistent with the recent geopolitical, institutional, and network-based approaches of considering territories of trade. These growing activities also echo the processes highlighted in Geopolitical Realism in which Pakistan is a strategic location and its relations with China, Afghanistan, and CAR states overlap larger regional struggles over power, trade routes and maritime access.



Fig 2: Regional Connectivity

Theoretical Framework

This paper utilizes multi multi-theoretical framework. It is a fusion of Geopolitical Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Network Theory to examine the possibility of Pakistan as a maritime and terrestrial port to Central Asia. These three perspectives have been combined in order to represent the strategic, cooperative, and infrastructural perspectives of connectivity of the region.

Geopolitical Realism

Geopolitical Realism describes the impact of the strategic location of Pakistan on the competition and power in the region in terms of trade routes¹⁰. Pakistan is situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Notably, its connectivity projects, including Gwadar port, regional corridors, and transit routes, are determined by the security interests (in particular, in relation to Afghanistan) and by the interests of the leading powers, such as China and Russia.

⁸ "Pakistan Offers Karachi, Gwadar Seaports to Tajikistan for Transit Trade to Middle East and Beyond," Arab News PK, July 3, 2024, <https://arab.news/5prq6>.

⁹ "PHOTO COVER OPTION TITLE GOES HERE CAN RUN THREE LINES," n.d., accessed October 9, 2025, https://manzilpakistan.org/pdf/S3-Asif-Ali-KhanUSAID-RegionalTrade%26TransitRoutes.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹⁰ W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz, "Political Realism in International Relations," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2023, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/realism-intl-relations/>.

The lens of geopolitical realism underscores that connectivity is not simply an economic practice but a geopolitical game that is played through the competing regional interests¹¹

Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal Institutionalism offers the second lens, with the focus on cooperation, interdependence, and regional institutions¹². Basically, it allows the Trade barriers to be lowered, policies are synchronized, and predictable regulations involve transit and infrastructure development through structures like the CPEC, the CAREC, and the QTTA. It is in this light that the gateway potential of Pakistan can be seen as a result of institutional support, collective governance, and long-term commitments that can be aimed at ensuring the easier movement of trade and transport across the borders.

The Trade and Connectedness Network Effect

Network Theory provides the structural insight into the ports, corridors and logistics networks in Pakistan in terms of a node in a regional trade network. Ports, such as Gwadar, Karachi, and Port Qasim, and overland routes to China and Central Asia, determine the flow of goods and capital in the region. The advantage of stronger nodes and better linkages makes accessibility better, and lowers transportation costs and creates network effects that spur higher volumes of trade. This theory assists in conceptualizing Pakistan as a state of transit, but as a key hub as well whose capacity at connectivity can affect a greater integration of the region.

Hence, the three theories have a balanced and coherent background of analysis. Realism in geopolitics explains the forces of strategic pressure, Liberal Institutionalism explains the frames of cooperation, and Network Theory follows the structural and logistical networks as a result of which connectivity acquires an economic meaning. It is a logical structure that is consistent with the empirical evidence of the regional patterns of trade, infrastructure investment and policy programs that formulate the role of Pakistan as a potential entry point to Central Asia.

Research Methodology

This paper employs the method of a qualitative case study and policy analysis in order to analyze the potential of Pakistan as a maritime and overland transit route and gate way to the Central Asian trade. The qualitative design enables the possibility of having a deep insight on the geopolitical, infrastructural and institutional issues that influence connectivity in the region. This methodological choice aligns with the study's theoretical framework, as qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to interpret how geopolitical power dynamics (Realism), institutional cooperation mechanisms (Liberal Institutionalism), and structural connectivity patterns (Network Theory) interact in shaping Pakistan's transit potential

Data and Sources

The study is based solely on secondary data, which comprises government reports, trade statistics, policy documents, regional agreements (CPEC, CAREC, QTTA), publications of international organizations, academic sources, and recent developments in diplomacy. No primary data (interviews or surveys) is undertaken.

¹¹ Muhammad Jahanzaib and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "The China Factor in Pakistan's Geo-Economic Tilt," *International Studies* 61, no. 2 (2024): 145–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208817241298339>.

¹² Tana Johnson and Andrew Heiss, "Liberal Institutionalism," in *International Organization and Global Governance*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2018).

Analysis of policy and document

An essence of the methodology is a systematic review of bilateral/ multilateral agreements, transit trade systems, corridor strategies, and institutional structures. This assists in determining the ways in which policy choices and collaborative processes facilitate or restrain connectivity opportunities of Pakistan. Such document analysis directly supports the Liberal Institutional lens, which emphasizes how formal agreements reduce uncertainty, create interdependence, and shape transit behavior among states.

Spatial and Connectivity Analysis

Ports, transport corridors, and trade routes by region are analyzed through the use of maps, route diagrams, and assessments of the geography. This brings out the space and structure of determining the gateway potential of Pakistan. This approach complements Network Theory, as it enables the study to understand Pakistan's position within a wider regional trade network and evaluate how node strength, link quality, and corridor alternatives influence trade flows.

Analytical Approach

The study is descriptive and exploratory, which determines the major opportunities, constraints, and emerging trends. The competitiveness of the corridors and ports in Pakistan is assessed based on comparative information on alternative regional routes. This analytical strategy is consistent with Geopolitical Realism, which requires examination of strategic pressures and competing corridors, while also aligning with the network-based need to compare cost, distance, and risk variables across routes.

Strategic Geography of Pakistan and Central Asia

CAR is strategically located and has the shortest distances to Pakistani ports. For example, the road distance from Tashkent to Karachi is nearly 2,600 km, making it one of the shortest sea-access corridors for CARs. In this regard, details of distances are appended below for ease of understanding¹³:

Table 1: *Approximate Distances from Tashkent to Regional Ports*

Destination Port	Approx. Distance (km)	Notes
Karachi (Pakistan)	2600	Shortest route via Afghanistan
Gwadar (Pakistan)	3000	Strategic deep-water port, CPEC-linked
Bandar Abbas (Iran)	3100	Affected by sanctions
Lianyungang (China)	4500+	Long, costly overland route
Russian Ports (Baltic/Black Sea)	5000+	Long, politically sensitive

Given its relative proximity to CAR states, Pakistan is a better node in regional trade networks as lower geospatial distance allows the country to lower transportation costs as well as raise the probability of traders favoring Pakistani ports over longer and more expensive routes. This is an implication of the Network Theory realization that a node that is close to other nodes in the same

¹³ "Pub_1560_ch4.Pdf," n.d., accessed September 17, 2025, https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/pub_1560_ch4.pdf.

geographical location greatly increases the functional value of the node in a multi-corridor system.

Pakistan's Ports as Gateways for Central Asia

Pakistan hosts three major seaports that are central to its maritime strategy. Broad details are appended below:

a. Karachi Port

Established in 1887, it is the main port of Pakistan, which handles around 60% of the country's trade. Located on the southern edge of the country, it is well connected to all major arteries of the country¹⁴. Its modernization is the top priority of the country, while cognizant of its potential for the regional countries of CAR and Afghanistan, in addition to its efficacy for CPEC-related projects.

b. Port Qasim

Port Qasim was established in 1973 and is located very close to the main city of Karachi. It is connected directly to the National Highway and has the same connectivity in the hinterland as Karachi port. It has over 400 industrial units and handles 51% of sea trade, and has a 5% growth rate with 24/7 operations. It handles oil, coal, and industrial raw material, all relevant to CAR states. Its expansion is underway with two LNG terminals in the pipeline¹⁵. Port has thus all the potential to be used as a transit port for CAR states.

c. Gwadar Port

Gwadar port is strategically located on the south-western Makran coastline, 400 km east of the Strait of Hormuz. Developed with Chinese investment, the port is of great interest to China. 40% of the imported oil destined for China transits through this area. Iran is only 80 km to the west. The home province of Gwadar, Balochistan, shares a border with Afghanistan, around 500 km from the port. The Chinese province of Xinjiang lies 1800 km northwest of the Karakorum range. Gwadar is located 3000 km from Tashkent¹⁶. Thus, the port is of great strategic importance for the region, including Afghanistan, CAR, and China & a potential business gateway for all players. Complete operationalization of the Gwadar port is thus the top priority of the Government of Pakistan. Notwithstanding, Gwadar, although dubbed as the Crown Jewel, has not yet sparkled to its fullest. In spite of CPEC's potential, it has not been developed in spite of over two decades. The same is only possible when both the Federal and provincial governments work in sync for their complete operationalization¹⁷. The map of CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) is appended below: ¹⁸.

¹⁴ "Port of Karachi," *Smart Import and Customs*, n.d., accessed September 17, 2025, <https://www.eezyimport.com/seaports/port-of-karachi/>.

¹⁵ "Introduction | Port Qasim Authority - PQA," accessed September 17, 2025, <https://www.pqa.gov.pk/en/about-us/introduction>.

¹⁶ Isaac B Kardon et al., *China Maritime Report No. 7: Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan*, n.d.

¹⁷ "Report-on-Trade-Facilitation-in-Pakistan_-Shipping-and-Logistics-Sector-17-01-2024.Pdf," n.d., accessed September 18, 2025, https://www.ntc.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Report-on-Trade-Facilitation-in-Pakistan_-Shipping-and-Logistics-Sector-17-01-2024.pdf.

¹⁸ "PHOTO COVER OPTION TITLE GOES HERE CAN RUN THREE LINES."

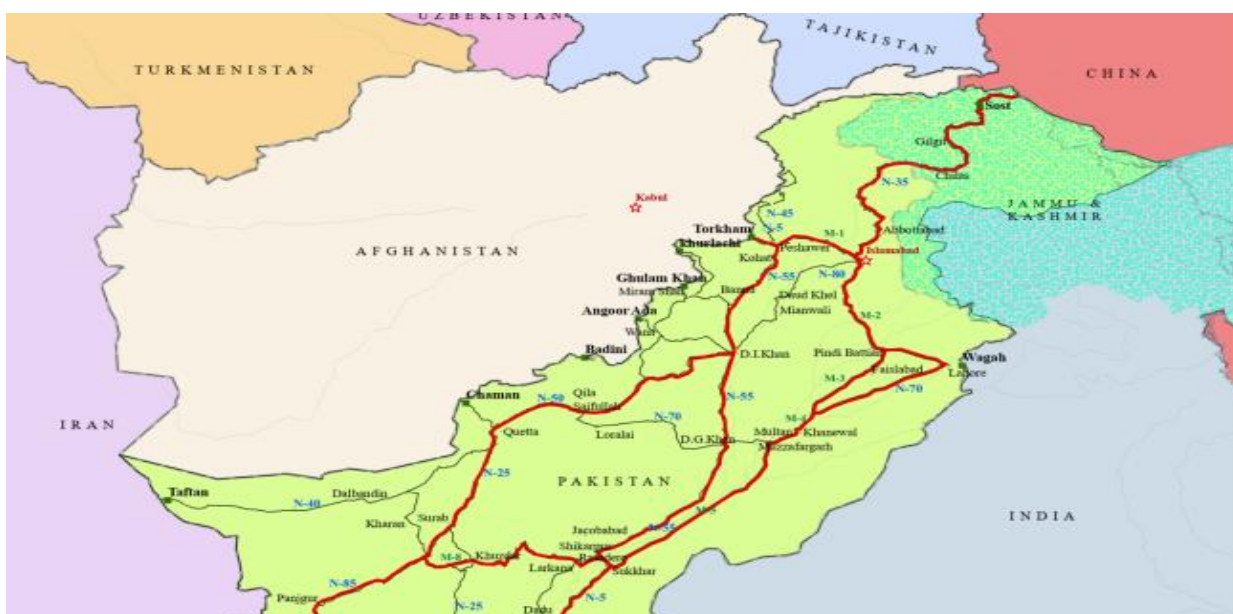


Fig 3: Map of CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor)

This trend of Network Theory combined with Liberal Institutionalism is behind the increased focus on modernization of the ports, regulatory harmonization and integrated logistics. The enhanced ports enhance the network capacity of Pakistan as a transit node and also institutionalization (CPEC structures, SEZ laws) and customs reforms facilitate the reduction of friction, uncertainty, and transaction costs among the CAR traders.

Very recently, in September 2025, Pakistan and China launched their Maritime Action Plan (2025-2029) under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that emphasizes exclusively what has been mentioned above, namely connectivity, and expansion with Gwadar, free zone stage II completion, fast tracking of East Bay Phase II, and obviously the blue economy collaboration. It is also being planned that the new Gwadar international airport will be integrated with Gwadar port for multi-model transit and logistic uplift. Further, Gwadar port will be developed as a green port, which will be connected with the Islamabad-Türkiye-Iran Transport Corridor¹⁹. Fifteen new industries are also being planned in the Gwadar Free Zone North Zone, which include petrochemicals, processing of seafood, and auto manufacturing, which will be imported from China. It is not limited to trade only. The said farmwork also supports marine research centers, CPEC-linked industrial parks for ship building, and tourism ventures programs. It will overall add 30% to Gwadar GDP by 2027 and is likely to create 25000 new jobs. Although ambitious but at least things are made to progress in some timeframe. These changes can also be characterized by the Realist dynamics as the development of Gwadar serves directly both the strategic purpose of China to get an alternative way of accessing the seas that bypasses the Malacca Strait as well as to expand the powers of the Beijing authority in the regional energy and trade channels. This is a geopolitical rivalry which adds further significance to Pakistan as a strategic transit state.

Above Initiatives are very encouraging, but they need to clear governance-related issues, environmental-related safeguards, and above all, local level linkages and political stability, and

¹⁹ "News Detail," accessed October 22, 2025, https://www.pcs.gov.pk/news-detail/pakistan-china-launch-20252029-maritime-action-plan?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

addressing of lawlessness, where applicable. Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a foreign-funded separatist movement do occasionally create a law-and-order situation. In Mar 2024, Law enforcement agencies of Pakistan successfully apprehended eight militants and neutralized them outside the complex of the port of Gwadar²⁰. So, the threats are real and need to be addressed by making them stakeholders of the project and creating job opportunities. The insecurity like the BLA attacks demonstrates the argument of Geopolitical Realism stating that material infrastructure fails to assure connectivity, state stability and control is also a crucial factor since non-state actors can compromise corridors and affect regional power calculation.

Ocean Governance Framework with CAR States

In order to make the above initiatives a reality, policy-level decisions are to be undertaken. The United Nations Agenda 2030, or Sustainable Development Goals, are significant toward effective ocean governance. Pakistan and CAR states need to take the lead in this regard²¹. Therefore, a bilateral ocean governance framework is mandatory. It will help in setting standards for EIA, the sharing of data, the management of fisheries, and the control of pollution. Coordination, risk assessment, and enhancement of institutional capacity are the keys in this regard. Structured ocean governance is compatible with Liberal Institutionalism that emphasizes that predictable cooperative governance based on rules can help states act in long-term economic interest even in uncertain geopolitical settings. It is thus vital to institutionalize environmental, regulatory, and data-sharing norms which would help to maintain the trust between the CAR states and Pakistan.

Pakistan–Central Asia Cooperation: Recent Agreements & Projects

In an encouraging sign, the bilateral trade between Pakistan and Central Asian states, along with Afghanistan and Azerbaijan, increased from \$1.92 billion in 2024 to \$ 2.41 billion in 2025. Pakistan's exports to Kazakhstan have increased to \$ 250.8 million followed by Uzbekistan (\$ 91.4 million), while it is consistent with Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan²².

Uzbekistan and Pakistan have also signed a Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership in 2021; however, efforts notwithstanding, logistical issues and transportation costs pose serious challenges as of yet²³. Furthermore, in 2025, Pakistan and Uzbekistan signed a document emphasizing increased trade, simplified customs procedures, and exploring enhanced connectivity. Efforts are being made to increase bilateral trade to \$2 billion by eliminating all hurdles within four years, implementing the Transit Trade Agreement (2021) and the Preferential Trade Agreement (2023)²⁴.

It's also encouraging that the discussion of the Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan Railway, which would connect Uzbekistan and other CAR states with Pakistan ports, is now in the technical

²⁰ Saleem Ahmed, "Pakistan Port Attack Kills Two Soldiers, Eight Militants, Say Officials," Asia Pacific, *Reuters*, March 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/unidentified-gunmen-open-fire-pakistans-gwadar-port-two-attackers-killed-2024-03-20/>.

²¹ Shijun Zhang et al., "Developing an Ocean Governance Regime for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: A Comparison of the Marine Environmental Legislation and Policy Framework by Utilizing CRILL Methodology," *Frontiers in Marine Science* 12 (May 2025), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2025.1577975>.

²² APP, "Trade with Central Asia, Kabul Surges to \$2.4b," *The Express Tribune*, September 28, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2569365/trade-with-central-asia-kabul-surges-to-24b>.

²³ "Uzbekistan, Pakistan Expanding Trade Amid Connectivity Challenges," accessed September 29, 2025, <https://thedi diplomat.com/2025/03/uzbekistan-pakistan-expanding-trade-amid-connectivity-challenges/>.

²⁴ "MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING (MOIB), PAKISTAN," accessed September 29, 2025, <https://www.moib.gov.pk/News/65256>.

phase. Once made, this line will provide sea routes to the landlocked CAR States via Pakistani ports in the Arabian Sea. It is envisioned as a \$ 5 billion project to build a 537 km railway between Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan and Peshawar in Pakistan. It will also pass through Kabul. Uzbekistan has already built a railway line to Mazar-e-Sharif²⁵. A map depicting the same is appended below²⁶:

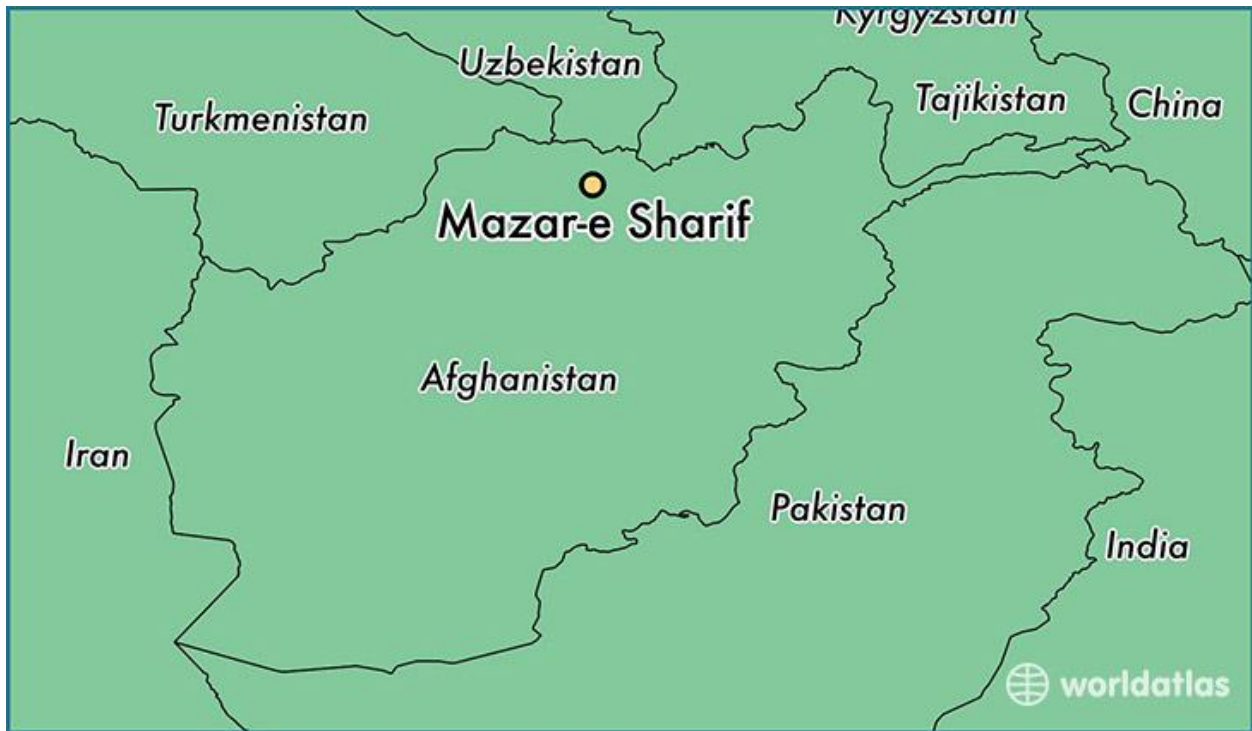


Fig 4: Mazar e Sharif at Uzbek Afghan Border

Internally, Pakistan, in anticipation of transit trades with CAR, is improving its port handling capacities, particularly at Gwadar, to ensure high value in the supply chain. It will help in further growing trade with CAR, while positioning the Gwadar port as a central hub. The ferry service from Gwadar to GCC has also been announced by the government of Pakistan. It will lower transport cost and transit time, and expand Gwadar's role as a transshipment hub, and help integration with CPEC.

Central Asian Trade Needs

Currently, CAR has a lot of requirements for import/export to facilitate global access to markets. Pakistan's geographic position and its deepwater ports are well-positioned to serve as a South-Central Asian transit hub. However, it requires good transport infrastructure, regional transit agreements, energy links like CASA 100, efficient customs procedures, and above all, a more stable Afghanistan. The gist of the major exports of CAR is appended below²⁷:

²⁵ "Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan to Connect via Joint Rail Project | UIRR," accessed September 29, 2025, <https://www.uirr.com/web-news/uzbekistan-afghanistan-pakistan-connect-joint-rail-project>.

²⁶ "Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan to Connect via Joint Rail Project | UIRR."

²⁷ "World Bank Document," n.d., accessed October 9, 2025, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/163831604904149823/pdf/Central-Asia-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan-Trade-Review.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Table 2: Major CAR Exports²⁸:

Country	Major Exports	Potential via Pakistani Ports
Kazakhstan	Oil, wheat, metals	Energy exports via Gwadar; wheat to South Asia
Uzbekistan	Gaseous hydrocarbons (764M), Cotton (218M), Cotton yarn (165M), Medicines (144M), Wheat (97M), Cane and beet sugar (70M)	Access to South Asian and Middle Eastern markets
Turkmenistan	Natural gas, petrochemicals	LNG shipments via Gwadar (future potential)
Kyrgyzstan	Gold, agriculture	Niche agricultural exports via Karachi
Tajikistan	Petroleum oils (143M), Sugar (45M), Medicines (33M), Cotton (112M), Cotton yarn (37M), aluminum (107M)	South Asian textile industries as importers

Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA)

The above was signed on 09 Mar 1995 between Pakistan, China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. The objective is to do trade with each other's countries by the Karakorum Highway/Khunjerab, offering an alternative route through Afghanistan. Its practicality is, however, limited due to seasonal closure of roads, logistical frictions, infrastructure gaps, etc. Nonetheless, recent pledges, which include TIR procedure adoption and yearly passage improvements through Khunjerab, etc., have improved its viability²⁹. Its complete operationalization, however, requires implementable measures and cross-border operational coordination for ease of business³⁰.

It's feasible for Pakistan because it enables land and sea transits from Karachi/Gwadar to Central Asian Markets without transit through Afghanistan. The treaty also has earmarked border posting and routing details³¹. Gwadar is strategically located under CPEC and a natural port for QTTA arrangements³².

Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC)

Conceived in 2001, the CAREC program consists of 11 countries, including Pakistan, China, and CAR states. The objective is to enhance trade cooperation and reduce poverty through laying the groundwork for economic corridor development. Its vision circles around the theme of Good Neighbors, Good Partners, and Good Prospects³³. In order to set a goal, CAREC 2030 envisions a long-term framework by developing sustainable economic cooperation programs, including

²⁸ "World Bank Document."

²⁹ "mulat_CHN_KAZ_KGZ_PAK_1995_eng.Pdf," n.d., accessed October 24, 2025, https://tadb.unescap.org/PAK/mulat_CHN_KAZ_KGZ_PAK_1995_eng.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

³⁰ "CAREC Program," n.d.

³¹ "mulat_CHN_KAZ_KGZ_PAK_1995_eng.Pdf."

³² "Central Asia," accessed October 24, 2025, https://mofa.gov.pk/central-asia?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

³³ "CAREC Program," *CAREC Program*, n.d., accessed September 18, 2025, https://www.carecprogram.org/?page_id=31.

trade, tourism, economic corridors development, and infrastructure & connectivity for the entire region³⁴.

CAREC, QTTA & Pakistan–CAR Institutional Connectivity

CAREC is of particular importance because all stakeholders are its members. Pakistan and China are involved in the CPEC. This CPEC, in the form of BRI, is now extended to Afghanistan and CAR by China. CAREC is thus a forum through which all this connectivity of Pakistani ports is a possibility using CPEC, BRI, and CAREC channels. CAREC, QTTA, APTTA, and related agreements collectively demonstrate how transactions costs are minimized by institutional regimes, the harmonization between processes is facilitated by them and the interdependence is encouraged by them. These all are Liberal Institutional components that compensate the geopolitical instability in Afghanistan or regional jealousy among the major powers.

Until now, three CAR states, including Uzbekistan, have shown interest in the use of Pakistani ports for trade. Uzbekistan has also shown interest in joining the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA)³⁵. QTTA is a trade deal for facilitating transit trade and traffic from the member countries. Currently, Pakistan, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan are its members. The interests are further aligned because all four countries are also members of CAREC. Although Afghanistan is not a member of QTTA, it still uses Pakistani ports under the Pakistan-Afghanistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA).

Despite Pakistan's efforts, Afghanistan is not yet stable enough for active business. CPEC will thus still enable Pakistan to connect to CAR through Western China routes in the future as shown below³⁶:



³⁴ breezy, "Regional Cooperation and Integration: CAREC Program," text, November 17, 2021, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, People's Republic of, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Mongolia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/topics/regional-cooperation/carec>.

³⁵ Riaz Haq, *CAREC: More Landlocked States Look to Pakistan's Gwadar Port*, n.d., accessed September 18, 2025, <http://www.riazhaq.com/2020/05/carec-more-landlocked-states-look-to.html>.

³⁶ Haq, *CAREC*.

Fig 5: Pakistan to Bypass Afghan Wakhan Corridor to Trade with Central Asia Via China

CPEC will thus facilitate trade among CAREC states, which are landlocked. The corridor will help in linking these countries to Gwadar and Karachi port as part of the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) as planned by China & Pakistan. In order to further the issue, a railway line project is also being envisioned. Although ambitious, but doable. It is envisioned to be a 1800 km international rail link from Kashgar in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region in western China to Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea, as depicted below³⁷.

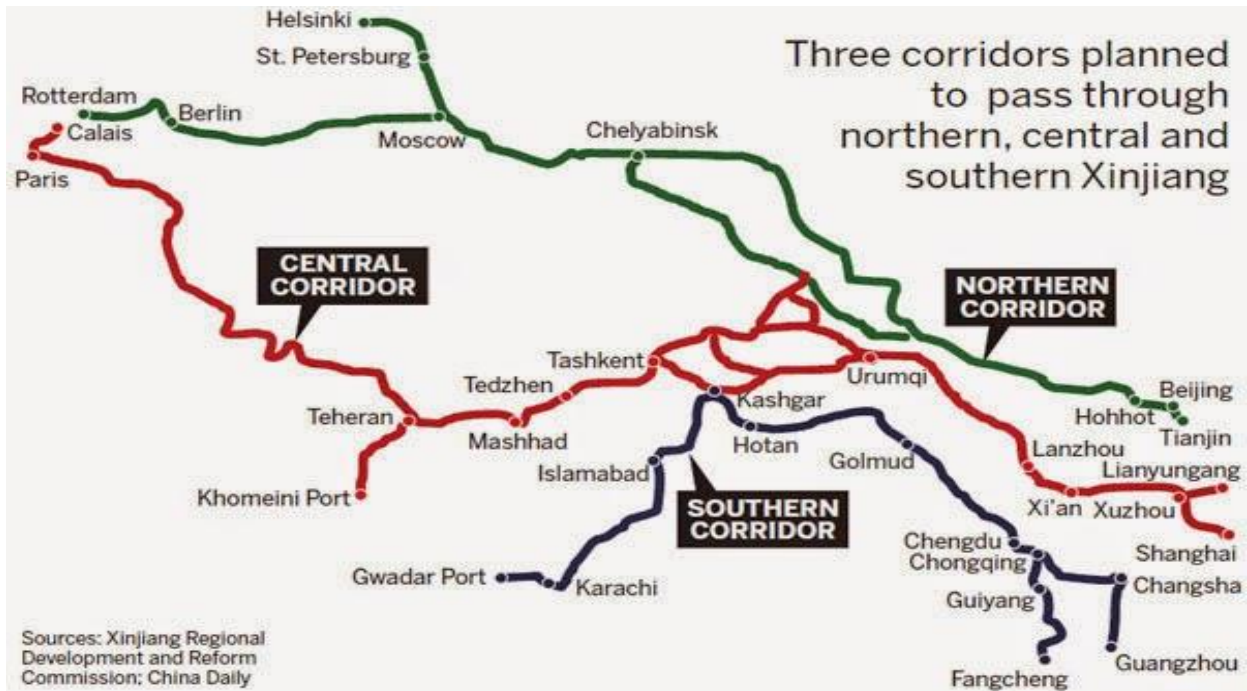


Figure 6: Rail Network Bypasses Afghanistan

Details are appended below³⁸:

Table 3: Comparative Assessment of Transit Routes

Route	Distance (km)	Cost Efficiency	Political/ Transit Risk
Pakistan via Afghanistan	~2,600	High (shortest)	High (security instability)
Pakistan via Iran	~3,100	Moderate	Medium–High (sanctions, politics)
Via China (CPEC/East Ports)	~4,500+	Low (long distance)	Low–Medium (secure but costly)
Russia/Europe Routes	5,000+	Low	Medium–High (geopolitical tensions)

³⁷ Haq, CAREC.

³⁸ Haq, CAREC.

The relative efficiency of these routes is an illustration of the Network Theory that the most efficient corridors are not just those with shorter distances, but also those with reduced risk and reliability and combined with multi-modes. The fact that Pakistan is able to provide a lower cost of the total cost of connectivity enhances its positional power in the Eurasian supply-chain architecture.

Pakistani Port Hinterland Connectivity

Now there are two problems that need to be addressed. First is connectivity from CAR states to Pakistan via Afghanistan or without Afghanistan. Second is connectivity to Pakistani ports through Pakistan. In this regard, the following are relevant:

- a. Karachi & Port Qasim Port Hinterland Connectivity.** Karachi and Port Qasim ports are, by and large, connected to Islamabad and Peshawar by road (Except Hyderabad to Sukkur) and rail. Then from the Khunjerab pass, there is a motorway till Manshera and road infrastructure till Gilgit. A well-constructed road is also available till the Khyber Pass from Peshawar. Rail connectivity is also available till Hevellian and Peshawar. So, hinterland connectivity is there from these two ports³⁹. These roads are also safe, and there are minimal security issues in these routes. So once the CAR connectivity reaches Pakistan, further connectivity is not a big issue. Notwithstanding, rail and road infrastructure need to be further in line with modern techniques while cognizant of additional traffic load.

Enhanced hinterland connectivity enhances the throughput and robustness of the Pakistan logistic network, which makes it a better trade hub in the region by minimizing the number of internal bottlenecks and the overall performance of the corridors.

- b. Gwadar Port Hinterland Connectivity.** Makran coastal highway is a state-of-the-art road which connects Karachi to Ormara, and then a very good road infrastructure is there till Gwadar and Jiwani till the Iran border. Gwadar to Quetta and then D I Khan Road is there. Quetta is then connected to Chaman, a famous border town with Afghanistan, and a flourishing trade point between the countries. DI Khan is then connected to the Burhan motorway. The rest of the route has already been described above⁴⁰.

Opportunities for Pakistan

The above discussion has clearly spelled out the importance of Pakistan and its role as a major gateway for CAR states. Its ports, coupled with land routes and corridors, can offer shorter and lower-cost market access to the CAR region. However, the art is the addressal of impediments and capitalizing on the opportunities it offers to Pakistan. Investment in port development, development of rail and road links, and regional political security, along with confidence-building, are the key. They are discussed in the ensuing paragraphs:

- a. Transit and Transshipment Hub.** Pakistani ports are the best southern gateways for CAR countries' bulk minerals, Oil and gas, fertilizer, and manufactured goods from CAR states. Further, they serve as shorter sea transit routes to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe in most cases of the route cases⁴¹.

³⁹ Dr Anjum Sarfraz, "Economic Improvement by Enhancing Operations of Pakistan's Ports," *Modern Diplomacy*, March 25, 2023, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/03/25/economic-improvement-by-enhancing-operations-of-pakistans-ports/>.

⁴⁰ Sarfraz, "Economic Improvement by Enhancing Operations of Pakistan's Ports."

⁴¹ "PHOTO COVER OPTION TITLE GOES HERE CAN RUN THREE LINES."

With its ports being a gateway to CAR exports and imports, Pakistan is improving its own economic power (Network Theory), as well as geopolitically (Realism) and is therefore better able to negotiate in the regional arena.

b. Value Added Logistic Services. Logistic services need to be improved at Pakistani ports. Bonded warehouses, Cold chain for perishable items, Stuffing and unstuffs of containers, etc., are a few examples.

- 1) Central Asian oil, gas, liquified products, etc. be transited via pipelines/rail to Pakistani ports (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan). Even Kazakhstan is showing interest in its trade through Pakistan's ports.
- 2) Export corridors for CAR other products like pulses, cotton, dried fruits, etc.

Main Constraints/Impediments

Transit security and political unrest (Afghanistan Route) are the top impediments. Cross-border instability, closure of borders like Torkham, disrupt trade flow, and raise insurance and logistical costs are the great impediments. Further, port closures, hinterland land/ rail connectivity issues also need to be addressed. The map depicting Pakistan's major Border crossings is appended below:



Fig 7: Map of Pakistan Border Crossing Points & Highway/ Motorway Network⁴².

⁴² "PHOTO COVER OPTION TITLE GOES HERE CAN RUN THREE LINES."

Ongoing turmoil in Afghanistan goes to confirm Realist arguments that power, security and geopolitical control have direct influence on the results of trade; therefore, even economically ideal routes are put at a disadvantage in absence of stable geopolitical circumstances.

Pakistan's Connectivity Opportunities with Central Asia: Leveraging Gwadar and Karachi Ports

Pakistan-Kazakhstan

Capitalizing on the prevailing Intergovernmental Joint Commission (IJC) and the Joint Business Council (JBC), the bilateral trade can be further improved through improved transit connectivity under QTTA, allowing it to access Gwadar Port via Karakorum Highway and China's Xinjiang province, bypassing Afghanistan. In addition to reducing logistic-related expenses, it would diversify Kazakhstan's trade corridors beyond the present Caspian and Russian routes.

Pakistan Kyrgyz

Presently, Joint Ministerial Commission (JMC) and Bilateral Political Consultations (BPC) forums are available for future prospects of trade. Presently, bilateral trade is very limited to just over \$ 11 million, and Pakistan's exports dominate the same. But QTTA is a good, potent forum, and Kyrgyzstan is a member of it. QTTA positions it as a beneficiary of maritime access to Pakistan ports for its export-oriented economy and linking it with CPEC-related projects.

Pakistan-Tajikistan

The Intergovernmental Commission and Joint Business Council are good forums to begin the access to Pakistan ports. Of great significance is Tajikistan's participation in the CASA 1000 project, a project that will transmit surplus hydrocarbon into Pakistan. Addressal of impediments like instability in Afghanistan, improving linkages through QTTA and Trans Afghan railway development, there is lot of potential for increasing trade and access to Pakistan ports.

Pakistan Turkmenistan

The Joint Intergovernmental Commission (JIC) exists, which supports bilateral projects. Particularly important are the TAPI gas pipelines and the TAP power transmission line. Both are strategic energy projects connecting Turkmenistan's resources to South Asia through Pakistan and to Pakistan's ports.

Pakistan Uzbekistan

A Joint Ministerial Commission and a Joint Security Commission exist between both governments to further trade talks. Uzbekistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (UPTTA) and a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) were also signed in 2021 between the two countries. Regarding stability in Afghanistan, the Trans-Afghan Railway Project (Termez–Mazar-e-Sharif–Logar–Torkham–Karachi/Gwadar) could be a game changer, reducing transit time by 30%. It will connect Uzbekistan's industrial heartland to Pakistani ports, providing a direct outlet to the Arabian Sea and beyond.

Practical Policy and Investment Plans

It can be divided into short-term, medium-term term and long-term, as appended below:

a. Short Term (Up to 3 Years). Launching of Port-to-Port Logistics Packages for key CAR Commodities (Mineral, cotton) with fixed handling charges and bundled services, and negotiation of simplified transit Protocol. This will give confidence to CAR states on trade through Pakistan ports.

b. Medium-term (3–7 years). Pakistan needs to invest in dedicated rail freight corridors linking Gwadar to Western and Northern parts of the country with interoperability standards since rail service will lower the transport costs of bulk and containers. Secondly, special economic zones (SEZs) near ports must be built focusing on textile finishing and agriculture processing targeted at CAR-specific export and import.

c. Long-term (Beyond 7 years). Once the trade started flourishing, the multilateral corridor was integrated, including CPEC, INSTEX, CAREC, etc. for accessibility to CAR states through Sea, rail and road linkages.

Pakistan can access Afghanistan through three border crossing points through APPTA (2010) for transit trade, i.e., Torkham, Ghulam Khan, and Chaman. Pakistan can also access CAR markets under the QTTA agreement via China to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, connecting Karachi and Gwadar port to China and the CAR states. It is an alternative route to Afghanistan, but open only in the summer months. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan also desire to join this. Map of QTTA (Quadrilateral Trade in Transit Agreement) is appended below: ⁴³.



Fig 8: Map of QTTA

The rail link is there, but with limitations. Beyond mid-country, it is limited. Dual lines are there from Karachi to Lahore; however, it's a single line from Lahore to Peshawar. There is a shortage of locomotives and the railway is a loss-making entity of the government of Pakistan for years. Further, its average speed is 19.3 Km/hr in comparison to 28 Km/hr in India and 45 Km/hr in the USA, EU, etc. Further, PR has no cold storage containers for transportation. So severe a limitation. Transit and Trade Routes Via Rail are appended below: ⁴⁴.

⁴³ "PHOTO COVER OPTION TITLE GOES HERE CAN RUN THREE LINES."

⁴⁴ "PHOTO COVER OPTION TITLE GOES HERE CAN RUN THREE LINES."



Fig 9: Transit and Trade Routes Via Rail

General Recommendations

Pakistan has traditionally relied on sea and air routes to trade., Road infrastructure is weak and primarily centered in Afghanistan. So, it is mostly domestic-centered. So not ready to take advantage and needs focused attention. Pakistan needs to focus on below aspects:

- a. Developing a South–North Economic Corridor through integration of CPEC with QTTA & UPTTA will create a seamless South-North Corridor linking the Arabian Sea to Central Asian states. Although ambitious, Pakistan shall engage CAR states in fostering economic growth by making them major stakeholders. In this regard, Pakistan needs to adopt fully the TIR conventions to simplify customs-related procedures to ensure no transit issues at the borders.
- b. Pakistan needs to resolve conflicts with neighboring countries through regional cooperation, good policies for the maintenance of trade facilitation, and planning and timely completion of infrastructure projects.
- c. Pakistan needs to modernize its axle load and long-term road maintenance.
- d. Law and order in the province of Balochistan is a grave concern, and political stability in the region is a must for any further go-ahead on the port connectivity with CAR states.
- e. Routes in Balochistan need repair and upgradation. It's vital or revitalize CPEC, QTTA, et, for making Pakistan a transit hub and gateway to Central Asian states.
- f. Custom examination must be made business friendly and there must be a service level agreement with terminal operators to curb delays at the port.
- g. The Kazakhstan model at Kohorgos BCP as a facility for trade exhibitors should be studied and considered⁴⁵.

Conclusion

In order to make the above initiatives a reality, policy-level decisions are to be undertaken. The United Nations Agenda 2030, or Sustainable Development Goals, are significant toward effective ocean governance. Pakistan and CAR states need to take the lead in this regard. Therefore, a bilateral ocean governance framework is mandatory. It will help in setting standards for EIA, the

⁴⁵ "PHOTO COVER OPTION TITLE GOES HERE CAN RUN THREE LINES."

sharing of data, the management of fisheries, and the control of pollution. Coordination, risk assessment, and enhancement of institutional capacity are the keys in this regard. Secondly, we need to prioritize the green port development concept in line with SDG 2020 of the UNO.

These cooperative frameworks highlight the applicability of Liberal Institutionalism since foreseeable rules, eco-friendly requirements, and institutionalized regulations decrease uncertainty and permit interdependence over the long term between Pakistan and CAR states.

Therefore, Pakistan and CAR need to establish a 'Pakistan-CAR States Blue Economy Forum' to monitor the progress on the perceived plans and projects, publish authentic data, and create investment opportunities. Again, the Pakistan National Institute of Maritime Affairs and other relevant research entities can always be engaged for the same. Success depends on first will and will alone. Strong governance, local inclusion, institutionalized mechanisms, and Blue Economy partnership can transform Pakistan-China maritime collaboration to new heights with regional growth and connectivity.

Pakistan's strategic geography and its network of ports present a unique opportunity to serve as a bridge between Central Asia and the global economy. By addressing infrastructure, security, and policy challenges, Pakistan can transform its ports into regional gateways and strengthen its role in the global trade architecture. So, it fits the Network Theory, as increasing the port power (node power), corridor efficiency, and multimodal linkages makes Pakistan more central in regional connectivity networks; and the Geopolitical Realism, because the capacity to be a gateway eventually makes Pakistan more strategically powerful in a competitive regional setting.

Notwithstanding, Pakistan needs to modernize its ports in line with Shanghai, Singapore, and Dubai. In the years ahead, the CAR states will converge toward Pakistan at that time if Pakistani ports are not geared up to take up the responsibility, the opportunity would be lost. So, failure is not an option for Pakistan.

Public-private partnership is a weak area of Pakistan in the maritime sector, and its development is also paramount in warehousing improvement, bonded storage increase, and freight forwarding to create a competitive logistical ecosystem.

Presently, a renewed vigor has been observed from the CAR states' diplomatic mission in Pakistan to further the interaction with stakeholders. Pakistan should encourage this to capitalize on these renewed sentiments of CAR states.

Pakistan stands at a pivotal juncture. The geographic logic for serving Central Asia via Pakistani ports is clear; the southern route is shorter and, with the right investments and political will, can be cost-competitive and reliable. Recent initiatives, including trade roadmaps with Uzbekistan, Gwadar investments, and digital trade facilitation through PSW, show that the foundations are being laid. The critical next steps are to secure corridor stability, complete hinterland connectivity projects, and harmonize regulatory frameworks so that Central Asian shippers choose Pakistan as their preferred gateway to global markets.

Conflict of Interest

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