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Paper  
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Irritants and Challenges

## Paper

# Pakistan's ties with Central Asian States Irritants and Challenges

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Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the energy-rich and land-locked Central Asian Republics (CARs) have assumed great significance in Pakistan's foreign policy considerations. Pakistan's geographical proximity with the Central Asian region, the geo-political and geo-economic significance of the CARs and the desire to become the gateway to Central Asia have stimulated Islamabad's interest in building closer political and economic ties with the region, which includes five republics of the former Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Historically, the areas that make up Pakistan have had close cultural and economic relations with the region. Central Asia has been closely tied to its nomadic people and the Silk Route, which has acted as a crossroads for the movement of people, goods, and ideas between Europe and Asia for centuries. British occupation of India and Russia's control over Central Asia had disrupted these ties in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Soon after gaining independence from Britain in 1947, Pakistan joined the anti-communist bloc, which prevented Islamabad from developing close relations with the Central Asian region. Pakistan had no direct contact with Central Asia under Soviet rule and Islamabad's support for the Afghan Mujahideen in the Soviet-Afghan war added to frosty relations. Support for extremist forces in Afghanistan in the 1990s, and emergence of several Jihadist/militant movements in Central Asia also complicated Islamabad's relations with the region.

Pakistan renounced its pro-Taliban policy after 9/11 and the shift in Pakistan's foreign policy since then has enhanced Islamabad's cooperation and economic links with Central Asia. However, the nature of Pakistan's relations with former Soviet Central Asia has largely been economic rather than political or strategic.

This paper endeavors to analyze Pakistan's foreign policy towards the CARs over the course of years. It focuses on the factors that enhance or diminish the prospects for close collaboration between Pakistan and these post-Soviet republics.

## The Context

Pakistan and the CARs share many things including religion and cultural ties. However, Islamabad's desire for close political and economic ties with the Central Asian region has been plagued by its foreign policy, mainly on Afghanistan. Pakistan's ties with the region are nowhere near as robust as the initial warmth had indicated when these Central Asian republics gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A multitude of internal and external challenges facing the region have hampered progress in that regard.

Unlike the other main players in the region, including Russia, China, India, Iran, Turkey and the US, Pakistan's political conditions and fragile economy have prevented it from engaging with Central Asia. The unrest in Afghanistan has also affected Pakistan's ties with the CARs. The poor

law and order situation in Balochistan and FATA, particularly along the border with Afghanistan, is a major challenge in the realization of the economic ventures that Pakistan seeks to pursue in the form of proposed pipelines bringing oil and gas from Central Asia to Pakistan, China and India.

Competing interests of various regional and global powers, aimed at accessing the energy resources of the Central Asian region have also been a hurdle in Pakistan's efforts to cultivate good relations with the CARs. The presence of US and NATO forces in the region has implications for inter-state relations, particularly US-Russia ties. Two factors most likely to sway the foreign policy of the CARs are potential economic benefits and getting rid of the extremist elements linked to the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

### **Challenges in Pakistan's Relations with CARs**

Various irritants and challenges that have a bearing on relations between Pakistan and the Central Asian states are discussed in the following pages.

#### *Geography*

Lack of a common border with any Central Asian state is one of the primary impediments to accessing the region. Tajikistan, which has borders with Afghanistan and China, is the most strategically located country from Pakistan's standpoint. Wakhan Corridor, an area in far northeastern Afghanistan that connects Afghanistan and China, could be the most convenient land link between Pakistan and Tajikistan. At its narrowest point Wakhan is 16 kilometers wide. However, the security situation in Afghanistan has been the principal barrier in trade through this channel as well as pursuit of economic interests between Pakistan and Central Asia.

Pakistan has long portrayed itself as a natural trade route for Central Asian republics to reach world markets by availing transit facilities and access to Pakistani seaports. Several agreements have been signed to develop the communication links, including road and rail links. However, lawlessness and instability along all these routes have proven to be a major hurdle in realizing the potential for economic cooperation.

#### *Teething problems*

The CARs have encountered a litany of post-independence problems, including rapid economic and socio-political transformation, security challenges, and suppression of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Under Soviet rule, the CARs were largely isolated from the rest of the world. Moscow handled foreign relations and direct cooperation even among the CARs was limited. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the governments of these new states were novices in managing foreign affairs. These states have much to offer to the world, including economic benefits and strategic advantages. In the initial years after their independence, the approach of the new states was mainly exploratory; policies were tentative and largely reactive to external pressures. However, these states have been seeking to expand their role internationally and within a relatively short period their priorities and approaches to foreign policy issues have become increasingly apparent.<sup>1</sup> Participation in Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), US-dominated NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) Program or the Sino-

Russia-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a reflection of that ambition. In the absence of an integrated policy in response to the changing strategic environment, the characteristic feature of the foreign policy of each of these states is one of the fluctuating alignments. Mistrust and suspicion have often encouraged the CARs to pursue policies at the cost of their neighbors, and a unified stand on important issues remains elusive.

The post-9/11 scenario has hastened developments in domestic politics and inter-state relations. Pakistan has emerged as a frontline state in the war on terror. Pakistan is trying to develop new avenues for cooperation with the CARs and has strived to improve its image smudged by years of support to extremist elements in Afghanistan. Pakistan, along with the CARs, is an important member of the Economic Cooperation Organization and its observer status in the organizations such as SCO shows the CARs' acceptance of Pakistan as a valued partner.

### *Afghanistan*

In the context of Pakistan's ties with the CARs, Afghanistan's security situation is of immense significance since Afghanistan offers the most direct access for the Central Asian region to ports and markets in South Asia and the Persian Gulf. Afghanistan can also be the conduit for Central Asian oil and gas to South Asia and Iran. But such benefits for both Pakistan as well as Central Asia could be realized only when the situation in Afghanistan is sufficiently stabilized and secure land access is possible.

The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the US disengagement from the region left a political vacuum in Afghanistan. Pakistan, because of its protracted engagement there, found itself in a dominant position. Other regional countries also sought to gain influence in Afghanistan without much success.<sup>2</sup> After the Soviet pullout, the Afghan civil war transformed the country into a hub of drug trafficking, gun running and smuggling of consumer goods to Pakistan and Central Asia.<sup>3</sup> The situation aggravated further as international actors and neighboring countries started supporting opposing sides.<sup>4</sup>

Taliban's emergence in 1994 was perhaps the most important development in post-Soviet Afghanistan. Initially, the Afghan people welcomed the Taliban due to prevalence of lawlessness, anarchy and excesses of warlords in the country. The Taliban vowed to disarm the warring factions, establish rule of law and peace by implementing Shariah in Afghanistan.

The rise of the Taliban presented Pakistan with an opportunity to have a friendly government in Kabul and realize the objective of a land transit route to Central Asia. Pakistan was among the few countries, including Saudi Arabia, who officially recognized Taliban's government in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of the US-led war on terror, Central Asia once again became a region of utmost importance not just for Pakistan but for other regional and international players as well.

### *Economic and Political Challenges*

The conditions in Pakistan have progressively worsened since 9/11 amid a flagging economy, poor law and order and political instability, which have affected Islamabad's ability to expand economic ties with Central Asia. Although the CARs have large reserves of oil, gas and enormous mineral wealth, they

have been unable to tap this wealth on account of their weak economies and lack of technological prowess.

Pakistan and the Central Asian republics have signed several memoranda of understanding on economic cooperation and collaboration in various fields. An inter-governmental Joint Economic Commission has also been set up with the countries in the region to give impetus to trade, economic and scientific cooperation. But the expected economic growth has not materialized mainly because of lack of implementation of the agreements.

Pakistan and Central Asian states are members of ECO, whose main objectives include developing and improving the economic infrastructure and transportation system in the region. However, the organization has lost its effectiveness and has been eclipsed by the emerging SCO, which has in its folds two major powers, Russia and China.

### ***Balochistan***

The strategic importance of Pakistan's Balochistan province has grown since China started building a deep sea port in Gwadar.<sup>6</sup> Pakistan's economic development depends on how it takes advantage of the tremendous economic and trade potential of energy-rich Central Asia. Balochistan is a vital link to expansion of economic ties and cooperation with Central Asia. But all that would depend on ensuring security and law and order in the province.

Balochistan is ideally situated to cater to the energy and trading needs of other countries in the region and make Pakistan an energy hub for Asia. The Gwadar deep sea port is expected to serve as a secure storage and transshipment hub for the Middle East and Central Asian oil and gas supplies through a well-defined corridor passing through the country.<sup>7</sup> In fact, if all goes as planned, Gwadar would be the terminus of multi-billion dollar gas pipelines, be it from Daulatabad's fields in Turkmenistan, South Pars fields in Iran or from Qatar. A nationalist insurgency, the centuries-old *Sardari* system thriving in Balochistan and sentiments of lack of control over their natural resources have hampered development and progress in the province. Assassination of Baloch leader Nawab Akbar Bugti in August 2006, terrorism, and target killings on ethnic and sectarian lines have added to the turmoil in this strategically important province. The convergence of stakes of major regional powers and international gas and oil companies is bound to bring increased international focus on the situation.<sup>8</sup> That might lead to the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline becoming the first thing to be scuttled, along with Pakistan's regional security. Pakistan's eastern neighbor India might still talk of seeking a stable Pakistan that is open to an acceptable settlement on Kashmir, but it would be in New Delhi's interest to see Pakistan trapped in the Balochistan quagmire.<sup>9</sup>

The prevailing security situation is not conducive for foreign investments in the province. Only political reconciliation can ensure the security environment needed for sustaining the ongoing development process and luring foreign investment that would help the province and eventually the country.<sup>10</sup>

## Regional and International Political Dynamics

### *India*

India lacks a direct geographical link with Afghanistan and Central Asia. It has to pass through Pakistani territory for any access to this region. By keeping close links with Afghanistan, especially post-9/11 and supporting the Karzai government, New Delhi has managed to expand its role in the war-torn country. Islamabad has also charged India of seeking to create unrest along Pakistan's western borders, especially in Balochistan, and exploiting the situation.<sup>11</sup>

India's ties with Central Asia grew after 9/11 amid perceptions of a shared threat from Islamist militants. India and the CARs have been engaged in close collaboration in order to contain cross-border terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking. The Central Asian region's borders with Afghanistan have made the secular regimes in the region vulnerable to the impact of religious extremism and ethnic unrest. Indian policymakers believe that any advance by Islamist militants in Central Asia could invigorate similar elements active in Indian-administered Kashmir.

India has also proposed an energy pipeline from Russia across Central Asia and China. Another gas pipeline which is of significant interest to New Delhi seeks to connect India to Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan, although progress in that regard depends on the nature of relations between New Delhi and Islamabad as well as the security situation in Afghanistan. The degree of strategic cooperation between India and the CARs is evident from the fact that New Delhi has established a military base at Farkhor in Tajikistan. The base has been operating since May 2002 in an area close to the border with Afghanistan. This has had serious implications for Pakistan's strategic interests in Central Asia. India also has the observer status with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.<sup>12</sup>

### *Russia*

Pakistan's relations with Russia have never been very friendly, mainly on account of Islamabad's support for the Mujahideen in the Soviet-Afghan war. But after 9/11, Moscow's ties with Islamabad have improved and that has been a factor in warming of the latter's relations with the CARs. Russia considers Central Asia its strategic backyard and is very sensitive to any factor that might impact the region. Therefore, Pakistan must be vigilant in its stance on Afghanistan.

The majority of the ruling elite in Central Asia comprises former leaders and members of the Communist Party. Russians are a major ethnic group in Central Asia and wield influence in decision-making bodies. Due to the legacy of Indian-Soviet relations, their approach towards regional policies is often pro-India. This approach poses a challenge for Pakistan regarding its position in Central Asia. Pakistan is striving to develop economic linkages that it hopes would not only create confidence that facilitates cooperation in various fields but would also ward off any irritants that undermine its relations with Russia and Central Asia.

### *China*

Pakistan and China share many common objectives vis-à-vis Central Asia, most significant among them being trade and cooperation in the energy sector. China's technical and financial support in building the

multi-billion-dollar Gwadar port aimed at channeling trade between the eastern parts of Central Asia—eastern Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—and Pakistan through Xinjiang is progressing, although difficulties in upgrading Karakoram Highway might prove to be an obstacle. In political and security terms, however, the two countries follow independent policies towards Central Asia. Initially China viewed Pakistan's support to the Taliban with considerable unease, because it apprehended that Uyghur militants in Xinjiang might find a safe haven in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. China has backed Pakistan's support for the war on terror and its stance to abandon the Taliban regime. Beijing sees US military presence in Central Asia as a strategic threat to its security and an attempt to encircle China.

### *Iran*

Iran and Pakistan have a history of close relations with the Central Asian region, which could be categorized as a combination of cooperation and rivalry. Both countries have been striving to build multilateral economic cooperation bilaterally and with the CARs through ECO. However, Tehran and Islamabad have divergent views on Afghanistan. Pakistan had supported the Taliban movement, whereas Iran had backed the Northern Alliance in the Afghan civil war. After the fall of the Taliban regime and a shift in Pakistan's policy on Afghanistan the two states have come closer. Pakistan's recent discussions with Iran with a view to seek transit for Central Asian oil and gas to Pakistan are bound to improve the relations further.<sup>13</sup>

### *United States*

Pakistan supported the United States in the war on terror in order to further its national interests. This support has led to considerable economic assistance for Pakistan although that has not shored up the country's economy on account of many internal factors. The US has also established military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, causing both Russia and the China to voice their concern over a permanent US military presence in the region. As a "frontline state" in the war on terror, and a "non-NATO ally" Pakistan offered the US a land transit route to Afghanistan for military supplies. Islamabad harbors concerns that the US policy regarding the future of Afghanistan might not be in synch with Pakistan's priorities.

### **NATO**

Active participation of the CARs in NATO's PfP program, the Northern Atlantic Cooperation Council, staging of NATO's joint military exercises in Central Asia and renewed diplomatic ties with NATO states, are all indications of the Central Asian republics' desire to forge closer ties with the West in order to eliminate possibilities of Russian military domination and ward off threats of terrorism and extremism from Central Asia.

### **Prospects for Pakistan**

Changes in the regional dynamics after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and specifically after 9/11, have enabled Pakistan to cultivate relations with the CARs. Pakistan's policymakers now have to formulate a comprehensive policy on the Central Asian republics in order to turn constraints into opportunities. Pakistan must develop good diplomatic ties with these states as well as develop economic ties with them by facilitating them with regard to trade and pipeline routes. This can only be done if Pakistan improves

its economic, security and political conditions. Pakistan can boost ties with Central Asia by undertaking both individual and joint ventures in all economic fields. These could include establishing business and trade houses, banks, insurance groups, professional services, and development of infrastructure. Pakistan can also offer assistance by sharing with the CARs expertise in management and financial institutions. At the same time, Afghanistan should not be overlooked. Establishment of peace in Afghanistan is of utmost importance in order to maximize economic prospects for both Pakistan and the CARs.

### Recommendations

- Pakistan must establish cordial relations with each Central Asian republic as each of them follow a distinct foreign policy.
- Despite facing irritants and challenges in Central Asia, Pakistan must implement all economic agreements with the Central Asian region. Pakistan must not wait for return of peace to Afghanistan before facilitating transit and pipeline routes from the CARs and develop the road and rail infrastructure.
- In order to benefit from this resource-rich region, Pakistan must look for multi-dimensional prospects for development. Cooperation and constructive engagement should be the cornerstone of Pakistan's approach towards this region.
- Pakistan must evolve a vibrant, non-aligned foreign policy, based on respect for the sovereignty of these states. Islamabad must not side with any party involved in the conflicts in Central Asia or anywhere else for that matter.
- Islamabad must use regional and international forums in order to develop trust in Pakistan and enhance economic and political cooperation. It should also establish various research centers in order to facilitate economic progress and conflict prevention.
- There should be frequent exchanges of scholars, cultural representatives, and government officials to develop better mutual understanding and people-to-people contact. Pakistan can also enhance relations by offering scholarships to Central Asian students in various fields. Exchange of research scholars, teachers and professors could be another avenue for cooperation. On return to their countries, these individuals could be goodwill ambassadors and facilitate further expansion in relations.

KNOWLEDGE FOR PEACE



**Notes:**

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- <sup>2</sup> Imtiaz Gul, *The Unholy Nexus* (Pakistan: Vanguard Books, 2002), p. 43.
- <sup>3</sup> Dr Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti, "Internal and External Dynamics: Pakistan's perspectives", in K M. Asif, (ed) *Central Asia internal and External dynamics*, (Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad, 1997).
- <sup>4</sup> Ahmad Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (Yale University Press, 2002), p. 7.
- <sup>5</sup> <http://reviewessays.com/print/Central-Asian-Game/20690.html>
- <sup>6</sup> Ziad Haider, "Baluchis, Beijing, and Pakistan's Gwadar Port" *Politics and Diplomacy*, (Spring/Winter 2005), p. 99.
- <sup>7</sup> "Pakistan's economy to remain robust: survey" <http://www.defence.pk/forums/economy-development/1049-pakistan-economy-news-updates-archive.html>
- <sup>8</sup> Sherry Rehman, "Balochistan after Bugti", *Dawn*, Islamabad, September 9, 2006, <http://archives.dawn.com/2006/09/09/ed.htm#4>
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "Energy port of the future" *The News*, Islamabad, June 26, 2006.
- <sup>11</sup> Dr Major Muhammad Khan, "Great Game for Gas and Oil in Central Asia and its implications," (NDC Journal 2004), p. 126.
- <sup>12</sup> Dr Moonis Ahmar, "Shangai summit and beyond", *Dawn*, June 24, 2006.
- <sup>13</sup> Svante E. Cornell "Regional Politics in Central Asia: the Changing Roles of Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and China" in *India and Central Asia: Building Linkages in an Age of Turbulence*, (New Delhi: SAPRA Foundation, 2003) [www.silkroadstudies.org/pub/030720Sapra.pdf](http://www.silkroadstudies.org/pub/030720Sapra.pdf)

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