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PAKISTAN-CENTRAL ASIA SOUTHERN TRADE ROUTES: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF NEW CENTRAL ASIAN ECONOMIC OUTLETS

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ABSTRACT

Largely accompanied by global catastrophes and technological revolution, the 20th century was a by-product of homogenous imperialistic motives of the global powers. The century witnessed the two important events the liquidation of colonial rule and termination of the closed market system and eventually, the parameters of economic acceleration have led the world into the complex interdependent economy, following a revolutionizing global economy rushed in by an era of pax-economica. Countries gave more consideration and put more efforts to remove all kinds of trade barriers. This unification of economic policies between different countries proved fruitful. Yet, the Central Asian region remained highly indifferent concerning international trade. Relying on secondary data and applying descriptive approach, the current study aims to highlight the potential of the Central Asian Region as a prominent part of world trade and economic development. Its focus is on the role of Pak-Central Asia southern trade routes in the region's economic growth. Despite the deadlock situation, the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have developed an enormous amount of oil and gas resources. To start trade with the other countries, Central Asia considers neighbouring countries as an ally for providing the trade routes and therefore, Pakistan's position in this scenario is crucial. However, due to several barriers including the inhibition of Russo-Phobia, Islamic mania, and the super modern and monopolistic attitude of United States, unnerved the Republics of Central Asia. Turkey with and ethnic and linguistic card, Iran at the beginning with the ideological bent and the traditional sociocultural model, Russian with the imperialistic and monopolistic model and of course, Pakistan with the Islamic brotherhood card and the Silk route partnership, confused the Central Asian Republics. Thus, in the given circumstances, economic cooperation is bound to usher in a new era, when the Central Asian economy will be brought back on the track. Nevertheless, such a model should not be aimed at creating confrontation, but the target must be cooperation because in this world of un-polarity confrontation would only lead to destruction and enhancement in the damage brought by Globalization.

KEYWORDS: Asian economic outlets, Central Asia, geo-political importance, regional actors, southern trade routes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Central Asia (CA) is a region of great historical, cultural, geopolitical, and economic significance. It is an important geopolitical sub-region of the Asia. Though some researchers include parts of Afghanistan also, the region primarily comprises five republics namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It is the biggest landlocked region of the world with an area of 4,003,451 km^2 and a population of 80.4 million (Table 1). In terms of geographic area Kazakhstan is the leading country in the Muslim world and the 9th biggest country in the world. It is also the world's largest landlocked country (Shibasaki et al., 2021). According to Population size, Uzbekistan the biggest Central Asian country. Geographically, the region is bounded by Russia on the north, Afghanistan and Iran on the south, China and Mongolia on the east, Eastern Europe on the northwest, and Caspian Sea on the southwest (Figure 1). The Caspian is an inland sea that is why the region has no access to link with the global water routes through waterways. It is indeed, a vast and diverse interior area at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. However, in this comprehensive response, only those aspects have been considered that make CA strategically and economically a significant region.

Figure 1: Central Asia and its Relative Location

CA occupies a critical location at the heart of the Eurasian landmass. The strategic location has made the region historically important for empires and nations seeking to expand their influence. During the Great Game in the 19th century, for example, the British and Russian empires vied for control of CA, highlighting its geopolitical value (Duarte, 2013). Today, CA continues to be strategically important region. It is a transit route for energy resources, with pipelines running through the region transporting oil and natural gas from the Caspian Sea to global markets. Additionally, CA is a key player in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which contribute to its geopolitical significance. It has a rich and diverse cultural legacy that has evolved over millennia. It is the birthplace of many ancient civilizations, including the Silk Road, which enabled trade and cultural exchange between East and West (Golden, 2011). The region's history is marked by the nomadic lifestyle of its inhabitants, such as the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, who have left a lasting impact on the culture and traditions of CA (Otunchieva et al., 2021).

Besides, CA is home to various ethnic groups, including Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen, each with their unique languages and customs. The legacy of empires like the Mongol Empire and the Timurid Empire has also left a lasting imprint on Central Asian culture, art, and architecture (Hierman, 2015). As regards historical significance, CA has been a cradle of civilization for centuries. It was home to the ancient city of Samarkand, a center of learning, art, and architecture during the Timurid era. The region has also played a pivotal part in spreading Islam, Buddhism, and other religions. The cities along the Silk Road were not only trading hubs but also centers of cultural and intellectual exchange (Haase, 2008). Additionally, the region has seen the rise and fall of numerous kingdoms, from the Mongols to the Russian Kingdom and the Soviet Union. These historical events have shaped the region's political and social landscape, leaving a deep historical imprint (Christian, 2018). For a very long time, CA, also known as Transoxiana or Shredine Asia in Russian, was a region characterized by both nomadic and settled populations, savagery and civilization, imperialism, and communism. However, its political, economic, and geostrategic significance has never been downplayed. This only occurred during Russia's 74-year control over the region, which was dormant behind the iron barrier. Its proximity to Russia, China, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, East Europe, the Middle East, and Pakistan, more borders than any other region in the world, makes its significance obvious (Gorshenina, 2021).

Before the fall of the Soviet Union, it served as the epicentre of world trade and civilization. In the past, invaders have used CA as a passageway to reach South Asia. Alexander the Great, the Greeks, the Turks, the Mongols, the Persians, and the Arabs who travelled from China to Europe carrying extortions and cultural messages all invaded the area, causing a political crisis thousands of miles distant. Additionally, by allowing the passage of countless immigrants and vast armies like as the Arians, Alexander the Great, Scythians, Tatars, Turks, Mongols, and Mughal Empire lame, the region also had an impact on world history (Akbar & Khan, 2022). CA was ruled by the Soviet Union for seventy-four years following Russian annexation. But with the fall of the USSR in 1991, CA acquired prominence again, and this gave the strategic situation in south and west Asia, as well as the rest of the world, a new angle. Regarding Central Asia's geostrategic significance, Sir Helford Mackinder remarked, "He who rules the heartland, rules Asia. He who rules Asia, rules the world". According to him, control over this area is essential to maintaining worldwide supremacy and influence. According to him, it is the planet's largest natural fortress, shielded by mountain ranges, polar ice caps, deserts, and arid regions. Being the biggest geographical unit on the Earth, whomever rules it has immense strength as they are not dependent on maritime forces (Barisitz, 2017). Along with a wave of social, political, and economic catastrophe, CA saw fresh opportunities with the fall of the USSR, including the formation of new alliances and partners. The US, Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, China, and even Russia all want to have relations with the new countries. With the change in its geopolitical structure since 1991, CA has continued to draw attention. Great powers such as China in the east, Russia in the north and west, Iran and Afghanistan in the south, the Hindu Kush and Pamir Mountain ranges to the south, and the Tien Shan Mountains to the east are neighbours of CA, which is located in the middle of Eurasia (Cornell, 2003).

From economic point of view, CA is rich in natural resources, including oil, natural gas, minerals, and agricultural land. The exploitation of these resources has become a significant driver of economic development in the region. Kazakhstan, for instance, is one of the world's major producers of oil and minerals. Turkmenistan possesses vast natural gas reserves, and Uzbekistan is a major cotton exporter (Ghebrezgabher & Sereke, 2021). Additionally, the region's strategic location makes it a crucial transit route for trade between Europe and Asia. The development of transport infrastructure, such as the New Silk Road initiative, aims to increase connectivity and trade, further underlining Central Asia's economic significance (Karymshakov & Sulaimanova, 2021).

Regarding security concerns, CA has faced various challenges, including terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking. Its proximity to Afghanistan, which has experienced conflict and instability, has raised concerns about regional security. The countries of CA have cooperated with international partners, such as the US and Russia, to address security threats and maintain stability in the region (Somzhurek et al., 2018).

As far as environment is concerned, CA is home to diverse ecosystems, including deserts, mountains, and steppe grasslands. The Aral Sea, once one of the world's biggest inland seas, has suffered from environmental degradation due to excessive water diversion for agriculture. Environmental issues in CA, such as desertification and water scarcity, have global implications, as they can contribute to climate change and affect neighbouring regions (Batmunkh et al., 2022). Central Asian states have emerged as pivotal players in the global economy. Their strategic geographical location, abundant natural resources, and economic diversification efforts have propelled them onto the international stage. Rich in energy resources, particularly oil and gas, these nations have become crucial suppliers in a world with escalating energy demands (Amirbek et al., 2020). Also, their investment in transportation infrastructure and participation in initiatives like the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor has positioned them as vital transit hubs between Europe and Asia. This connectivity has not only fostered economic growth but also heightened their geopolitical significance. Amid these developments, Central Asia's agricultural sector, innovative endeavours, and efforts to improve the business environment are further contributing to their global economic impact (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2015).

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study is a critical comparison of new central Asian economic outlets based on secondary data i.e. online stats, articles and progress reports etc. regarding Pak Central Asia southern trade routes; therefore, qualitative research design has been adopted to conduct this study. The content analysis has been done to explore the different significant aspects of Pak-Central Asia Southern trade routes as well as the role of local key stakeholder i.e. Pakistan, China, India, Afghanistan and Iran along with international players USA and European Union.

3. MAJOR FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Central Asian countries are captive by landlocked Ness of their location, with no direct access to world ocean trade. Due to the domination of Russian, Chinese and to some extent Iranian influence, and landlocked Ness, the cost of any commodity coming in or going out of CA is escalated, discouraging foreign business and resultantly connectivity with rest of the world. To overcome this issue, they are seeking access to nearest seaports whereas Pakistan is interested to diversify its economy by gaining access to CA. Besides China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Quadrilateral Transit in Traffic Agreement (QTTA), transit trade through Afghanistan can be another best option (Figure 2). Although, Afghanistan has been traditionally a land-bridge between the sub-continent and CA, the trade through this country has always been challenging. Due to its political unrest, Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) of 2010 has not been sufficiently effective in facilitating Pakistan's transit trade to CA. Recently, a realization has been sensed emerging to promote business with Central Asian republics through transit routes. With a big population and land and other resources, CA undoubtedly has a great potential to play an imperative role in the world trade channels. Some selected features of the region are given Table 1.

Figure 2: Pakistan's CPEC and the Central Asian QTTA routes

Table 1: Main Features of the Central Asian Countries

Country Name & Capital	Area in km^2	*Population in Millions	*Urban Population (%)	Official Language	GDP (Nominal) in Billion $ (2023)	HDI (2021)
Kazakhstan Astana	2,724,900	19.9	58	Kazakh, Russian	245.695	0.811
Kyrgyzstan Bishkek	199,950	6.8	38	Kyrgyz, Russian	12.309	0.692
Tajikistan Dushanbe	142,550	10.2	28	Tajik, Russian	12.796	0.685
Turkmenistan Ashgabat	488,100	7.1	54	Turkmen	82.624	0.745
Uzbekistan Tashkent	448,978	36.4	51	Uzbek	92.332	0.727
Region's Overall	4,003,451	80.4	50	NA	446	NA

*PRB, World Population Data Sheet 2023, HDI= Human Development Index.

3.1 Relations between Pakistan and CA

Pakistan and CA have had diplomatic relations since the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC, and these relations persisted into the 18th century. The Indus Civilization that encompasses Pakistan today, is where it all started. Political, cultural, economic, and religious interactions have continuously persisted between the people of Pakistan and CA. The Aryans were among the Central Asian and West Asian nomads who invaded South Asia in order to take or share its resources. They entered South Asia from the north-west (Khan, 2022). The relatively flat west was unable to enter the subcontinent due to the mountainous barrier to the north. After many centuries, the more daring and hopeless emperors from CA managed to get past the geographical obstacles and take control of South Asia. The development of the political and economic history of the subcontinent was significantly influenced by geographical factors.

The Scythians were Central Asian nomads who crossed the Pamir from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan into Gilgit and Taxila in the second and third centuries BC. The two nations' political ties began with this. These nomads extended as far as current Sindh, and Maues, the ruler of the tribe, set up court in Taxila. The 'Kushan Empire', which spanned the Aral Sea to the Arabian Sea and the Caspian Sea to the Bay of Bengal, was the following empire (Falk, 2014). Their winter capital was Purushpura, which is now become Peshawar. There was an end to the 'Achaemenian Empire', which dominated the Indus Valley and CA. They were vanquished by Alexander the Great's Greek army. After capturing CA and the Indus Valley, Alexander was driven out of CA via Baluchistan. Between the Pamir and Hisar mountain ranges, a new state known as 'Bactria', which today encompasses Afghanistan, was founded by Greek warriors who fled CA (Akbar & Khan, 2022).

For two centuries, the Turkish Samanids, Seljuks, and Karakhittais dominated CA. Their descendants, Mahmud of Ghazni and Mahmud Ghori, governed the Indus people. The Delhi Sultans forged a friendship with the people of the south and brought together the people of South and CA. Timor Lang was their final Mongol emperor, and parts of his dominion were in modern-day Pakistan. Due to Timor's weak successor and Russia's invasion of the Muslim nations of CA in the 18th century, these political ties started to deteriorate. In 1918, following the communist revolution, CA was restrained behind the hard curtain and the Indian subcontinent was to be governed by the British Empire (Bose & Jalal, 2022). As a result, the connection between Pakistan and CA was severed, with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan being affected more due to their rugged terrain on the Chinese border. However, Pakistan and CA were dominated by the same people who previously had political ties. The CA and Pakistan are thus linked by their similar history, religion, beliefs, and practices as well as their physical vicinity to one another. Security and economic growth are the two main priorities for Pakistan and the CA following their independence. Pakistan's and the CA economies complement each other (Cummings, 2013).

3.2 Economic outlets to Central Asia (CA)

3.2.1 Traditional Routes

The traditional routes for economic links to CA involve land-based trade routes that have existed for centuries. These routes are crucial for moving goods between CA and its nearby countries. The most significant among them is the Silk Road, which was historically used for trade between Europe and Asia, passing through CA. These ancient routes have been revitalized in modern times, with countries like China investing in projects like the Silk Road Economic Belt to enhance connectivity. These land routes remain vital for trade and economic interactions, serving the flow of goods and ideas between CA and the rest of the world (Warikoo, 2016).

3.2.2. Dramatic emergence of new economic outlets

The dramatic emergence of new economic opportunities in CA is transforming the region's economic landscape significantly. This transformation is marked by a shift towards greater economic diversification, innovative industries, and increased foreign investments. Central Asian countries, traditionally reliant on sectors like energy and agriculture, are actively seeking new avenues for growth (Aslund, 2013). One of the primary drivers of this transformation is the active participation of Central Asian nations in global initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This engagement has led to substantial infrastructure expansion, including the construction of new roads, railways, and ports, enhancing both regional and international trade connectivity. These initiatives are not only facilitating the movement of goods but also opening up opportunities for cross-border investments and partnerships (Kohli, 2017). Additionally, CA is experiencing a notable pivot towards technology and innovation. Governments and entrepreneurs in the region are recognizing the potential of digital technologies, leading to the emergence of numerous start-ups and digital ventures. These enterprises are contributing to the growth of a knowledge-based economy, fostering innovation, and creating employment opportunities for the region's young and tech-savvy population (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2015).

Moreover, Central Asian countries are actively working to reduce their reliance on traditional sectors. While energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas, continue to be important, there is a concerted effort to diversify economic activities. This diversification includes investments in manufacturing, services, agriculture, and initiatives aimed at improving the business environment to attract foreign investments across various sectors (Shadrina, 2019).

3.2.3 Pakistan's position to southern economic outlets

To connect CA to southern economic outlets, Pakistan plays a crucial role. Pakistan, which is situated to the south of CA, is an important conduit for communication and trade between the landlocked nations of CA and the Arabian Sea. As a flagship project of the BRI, the CPEC is one of the most notable initiatives that highlights Pakistan's strategic importance. The Central Asian republics now have direct access to the Arabian Sea and global shipping lanes, thanks to the extensive road, rail, and pipeline network known as the CPEC. This corridor is a game-changer for the entire area since it drastically shortens the distance that Central Asian products must travel to reach international markets (Hussain et al., 2021).

Additionally, Pakistan may take use of several opportunities provided by the CPEC to solidify its status as a major hub for trade and transit. This makes it easier for products to travel from China to the Arabian Sea as well as from CA. Pakistan's economic prospects are improved by this strategic alignment, which also strengthens Pakistan's position in regional and global commerce. In addition to the CPEC, Pakistan has been actively supporting economic integration and collaboration with Central Asian nations through several diplomatic and commercial efforts. Exploring bilateral agreements for commerce, transit, and energy are ways to improve connectivity and foster economic cooperation (Fazal et al., 2023).

3.2.4 Indo-Iranian Route

The Indo-Iranian route is a historically significant pathway that connects CA to both India and Iran, serving as a vital corridor for trade and cultural exchange. This ancient trade route, also known as the Silk Road, has played a pivotal role in the movement of goods, ideas, and people for centuries (Ghosh, 2016). The Indo-Iranian route extends from the heart of CA, traversing regions that are now part of modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. It is historically connected to the Central Asian cities of Samarkand and Bukhara to the Iranian cities of Tehran and Isfahan and further southward to the Indian subcontinent (Syzdykova et al., 2020). One of the key highlights of this route is its role in facilitating the exchange of goods between CA, Iran, and India. Central Asia's rich resources, including silk, spices, and precious metals, were transported through this route to markets in Iran and India. Conversely, valuable commodities from India, such as textiles, spices, and gemstones, moved northward through this route to reach CA and beyond. The Indo-Iranian route was not just about trade, it also facilitated the flow of culture, religion, and knowledge.

Buddhism, for example, spread from India to CA and beyond via these trade routes. It also allowed for the exchange of architectural styles, art, and scientific advancements, contributing to the rich cultural heritage of the regions it connected (Wilkinson, 2014).

Today, the Indo-Iranian route continues to have economic and strategic significance. Various transportation and energy projects have been proposed to revitalize and expand this route in modern times. These initiatives aim to enhance trade connectivity and regional cooperation, benefiting not only CA, Iran, and India but also neighbouring countries and the global economy. However, in addition to political relations, distance and travelling time are most important considerations in the world trade of today. Table presents a comparison of the distances of CA from Pakistan’s and Iran’s ports.

Table 2: Comparison of CA distance from Pakistan’s and Iran’s seaports

From	To	Distance (km)	From	To	Distance (km)
Karachi	Dushanbe	2,041	Chahbahar	Dushanbe	2,574
Karachi	Bishkek	3,245	Chahbahar	Bishkek	3,491
Karachi	Tashkent	2,613	Chahbahar	Tashkent	2,862
Karachi	Almaty	3,422	Chahbahar	Almaty	3,668
Karachi	Ashgabat	2,187	Chahbahar	Ashgabat	1,853
Gwadar	Ashgabat	1,956/4,372	Vladivostok	Dushanbe	8,664
Karachi	Chelyabinsk	4,670	Novorossiysk	Dushanbe	3,401

Source: Javaid, F. & Siraj, U. (2021).

3.3 Pipelines projects and Pakistan

Pipelines projects in Pakistan have played a vital role in facilitating energy transport and regional connectivity. The notable projects are the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) and the Iran-Pak-India (IPI) gas pipeline projects (Figure 3).

3.3.1 TAPI pipeline project

The TAPI pipeline project represents a significant transnational effort in the energy sector, with the primary goal of transporting natural gas from Turkmenistan's rich reserves to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The construction of the project started from Turkmenistan in December 2015. This ambitious project covers a vast distance of approximately 1,814 km, making it one of the longest pipelines in the world (Saira & Javed, 2022). The TAPI pipeline holds immense potential for Pakistan in several crucial ways. Firstly, it offers a stable and dependable source of natural gas, which is essential for the country's energy needs. Pakistan has been grappling with energy shortages in the past, and the TAPI pipeline is expected to alleviate some of these issues by providing a consistent supply of natural gas. Secondly, this project has the potential to stimulate economic growth in Pakistan. A reliable energy supply is a cornerstone for industrial and economic development. By having access to Turkmen natural gas, Pakistan can bolster its industrial sectors, create jobs, and attract investments, thereby contributing to its economic prosperity (Abbas, 2015). Thirdly, the TAPI pipeline enhances energy security in Pakistan. Diversifying energy sources and supply routes reduces dependency on a single supplier, increasing the resilience of the country's energy infrastructure. Furthermore, the TAPI pipeline strengthens regional cooperation and diplomatic ties. The project involves collaboration among multiple countries, fostering a sense of shared interest and stability in the region. It signifies a constructive step towards regional peace and economic integration (Zulfqar, 2018). However, due to several political and other hindrances, the project is still incomplete and waiting for initiation.

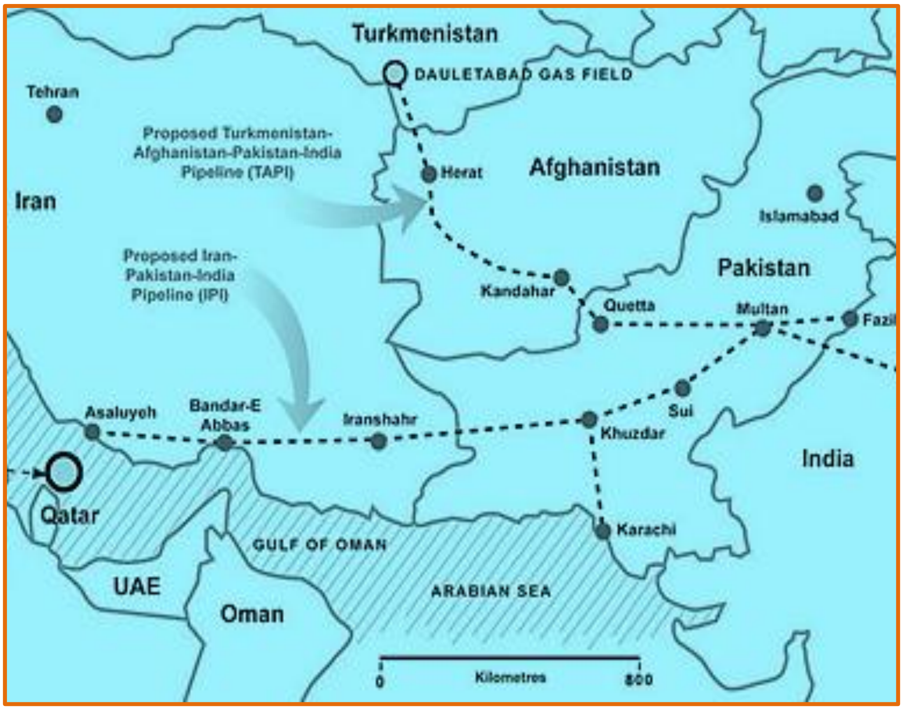

Figure 3: TAPI and IPI pipeline projects

3.3.2 The Iran-Pak-India (IPI) gas pipeline project

The IPI gas pipeline project, also known as the Peace Pipeline, was an ambitious initiative aimed at transporting natural gas from Iran to Pakistan and India. This project was conceived to address the growing energy needs of these countries and promote regional cooperation. However, despite initial enthusiasm and negotiations, the project faced several challenges and remains incomplete (Khan, 2012). The IPI gas pipeline was envisioned as a 2,775 km pipeline that would initiate from Iran's South Pars gas field, traverses Pakistan, and terminate in India (Figure 3). It was expected to have the capacity to transport significant quantities of natural gas, providing a dependable and cleaner source of energy to satisfy the increasing demands of Pakistan and India's rapidly growing populations and industries. The potential benefits of this project were substantial. For Pakistan, it promised a solution to its energy crisis, reducing the country's reliance on expensive and environmentally detrimental fossil fuels. India, too, saw it as a valuable energy source that could support its economic growth and development while reducing its carbon footprint (Lall, 2013).

However, several factors contributed to the project's challenges and delays. One significant obstacle was the geopolitics of the region. The pipeline was to pass through politically sensitive areas, including Balochistan in Pakistan, which posed security concerns. Additionally, international sanctions on Iran complicated financing and investment in the project, deterring potential backers. Besides, negotiations between the countries involved, particularly India and Iran, encountered difficulties related to pricing agreements, transit fees, and security concerns (Shah et al., 2020). As a result, despite many years of discussions and agreements in principle, the IPI gas pipeline remains incomplete, with the project experiencing delays and uncertainties.

3.4 Gawadar-Central Asia route

The Gwadar-CA route is a strategic transportation corridor that holds significant potential for trade and connectivity between the Gwadar Port in Pakistan and Central Asian countries. This route is part of broader efforts to boost regional trade and provide landlocked CA access to the Arabian Sea, opening new economic opportunities. At the heart of this route is the Gwadar Port, located in Pakistan's southwestern province of Balochistan. Gwadar Port is strategically positioned near the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most crucial oil and gas transit chokepoints. It offers a shorter and more efficient maritime route for Central Asian countries to access global markets compared to their traditional routes through Russia or Iran (Siddiqui & Din, 2023).

The Gwadar-CA route involves the development of road and rail networks connecting Gwadar Port to landlocked Central Asian nations, including Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. The CPEC plays a pivotal role in this transportation corridor, with extensive infrastructure projects aimed at facilitating trade and transportation. These projects include the construction of roads, railways, and pipelines, all designed to provide connectivity and enhance economic cooperation. For Central Asian countries, the Gwadar-CA route offers several advantages. It provides them with an alternative and more cost-effective route for exporting their goods to international markets. It reduces transportation times and costs, which can be particularly significant for landlocked nations. Additionally, it diversifies their trade routes, reducing dependence on a single transportation corridor (Khetran & Khalid, 2019).

Pakistan, on the other hand, stands to benefit from increased economic activity at Gwadar Port and enhanced trade connectivity with CA. Gwadar Port could potentially become a bustling regional trade hub, boost economic growth and create employment opportunities in the region. Pakistan also aims to position itself as a transit and trade corridor, reaping the economic rewards of facilitating Central Asian trade.

3.5 Challenges and implications to Asian markets

3.5.1 Indo-Pak Rivalry

The Indo-Pak rivalry has long been a prominent factor affecting Asian markets and regional stability. The contentious relationship between India and Pakistan, rooted in historical disputes, territorial conflicts, and ideological differences, has substantial implications for the economic landscape of the entire South Asian region and beyond. One of the most pronounced challenges posed by the Indo-Pak rivalry is regional instability. Periodic flare-ups of tension, border skirmishes, and military standoffs have created an environment of uncertainty that discourages foreign investments and hampers economic growth in the region. This instability can deter both domestic and international investors, impacting economic prospects not only for India and Pakistan but also for neighboring countries (Robertson et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the high defense expenditures incurred by both nations because of the rivalry divert significant resources away from productive sectors of the economy. The substantial allocation of funds for defense and security has the potential to limit investments in critical areas such as infrastructure, healthcare, education, and social welfare, hindering long-term economic development. Trade between India and Pakistan, two of the most populous countries in South Asia, is far below its potential due to strained relations. Despite sharing geographical proximity, the limited trade between the two countries acts as a significant barrier to regional economic integration. Increased trade could enhance economic cooperation, create jobs, and promote prosperity throughout South Asia (Ghafoor, 2022). The Indo-Pak rivalry also has implications for energy security in the region. Both countries have experienced energy shortages, and cooperation on energy projects could help address these issues. For example, the IPI gas pipeline project, mentioned earlier, aimed to provide natural gas to both India and Pakistan, reducing their energy deficits.

However, ongoing tensions have hindered such collaborative initiatives, leaving energy security concerns unaddressed. In terms of global implications, the Indo-Pak rivalry can contribute to geopolitical tensions. The involvement of major global powers in the region, owing to their alliances with India and Pakistan, can potentially exacerbate regional conflicts and hinder peaceful resolutions. These geopolitical dynamics can affect international trade and investment, creating uncertainties that ripple across Asian markets and beyond (Tarapore, 2020).

3.5.2 US and European intentions

The intentions and policies of the US and European countries significantly impact Asian markets, given their economic and political influence in the region. These intentions can have both beneficial and adverse implications for Asian economies. As regards trade and economic relations, the US and European countries have been important trading partners for many Asian nations. Their intention to engage in trade and investment in Asia can stimulate economic growth in the region. For instance, the US engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, through initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Vision and Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, signal an interest in enhancing trade ties. European countries also have trade agreements and investment interests in Asia. This can open up markets and create opportunities for Asian exporters and investors (Huang, 2016).

The intentions of Western countries to invest in infrastructure and development projects in Asia can positively impact the region's economies. The European Union's connectivity strategy and the US support for infrastructure projects can lead to improved transportation networks, energy infrastructure, and job creation. However, western intentions in Asia are not solely economic. Geopolitical interests can create tensions and uncertainties. For example, the US-China rivalry has implications for Asian markets, as trade disputes and technology restrictions can disrupt supply chains and affect market stability. Additionally, concerns over human rights and governance in some Asian countries can lead to diplomatic tensions and sanctions (Yu, 2020). The US and European countries have also shown intentions to address climate change and promote sustainability. Their support for clean energy technologies and green initiatives can benefit Asian markets by encouraging investments in renewable energy, reducing environmental risks, and opening opportunities for green financing. Western intentions in monetary policy and financial regulation can affect Asian markets. Actions by central banks in the US and Europe, such as interest rate changes and monetary easing can impact capital flows, exchange rates, and financial stability in Asia. The intentions of Western nations in the technology sector can have far-reaching consequences. Policies related to data privacy, cyber-security, and intellectual property rights can impact Asian tech companies' operations and international partnerships (Chin, 2016).

3.5.3 TAPI pipeline crisis

The TAPI pipeline project has faced a series of crises and challenges that have hindered its progress and realization. One of the most significant issues is the security situation in Afghanistan, through which the pipeline is intended to pass. The ongoing conflict and instability in Afghanistan have raised concerns about the safety of the pipeline infrastructure and the ability to secure it adequately. Additionally, financing and funding for the TAPI pipeline have been major stumbling blocks. The project requires substantial investment, and securing financing in the face of geopolitical uncertainties and security risks has proven to be a formidable challenge. The involvement of multiple stakeholders, including Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and international investors, has complicated negotiations and delayed progress (Joshi, 2011).

Moreover, the TAPI pipeline has faced political and diplomatic challenges also. Bilateral and regional disputes, as well as changing political dynamics among the participating countries, have at times strained negotiations and cooperation. Ensuring that all parties maintain a shared commitment to the project has been a complex undertaking. Environmental concerns, particularly regarding the pipeline's potential impact on fragile ecosystems in Afghanistan and Pakistan, have also emerged as an issue. Balancing the economic benefits of the project with environmental conservation has presented challenges that require careful consideration (Proedrou, 2018).

3.5.4 Uzbek problem

The Uzbek problem, in the perspective of the previous challenges faced by the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) pipeline project, adds another layer of complexity. Uzbekistan's geographical proximity to Turkmenistan and its potential involvement in the project introduce new dynamics. While Uzbekistan could offer a more stable transit route for the pipeline, its participation would require intricate negotiations and diplomatic agreements among multiple Central Asian nations. Additionally, Uzbekistan's own energy interests and concerns about the security situation in Afghanistan further complicate the project. This presents both an opportunity for enhanced regional cooperation and economic benefits but also underscores the need for comprehensive diplomatic efforts to address the various interests and concerns of all stakeholders involved in the TAP pipeline initiative (Iqbal & Rauf, 2018).

3.5.5 Religious threats

The religious threat in the context of regional challenges faced by projects like the TAP pipeline is a critical consideration. The pipeline traverses' regions where religious extremism and terrorism have been prevalent, raising concerns about the safety and security of the infrastructure. Extremist groups, often motivated by religious ideologies, have targeted critical energy infrastructure in the past, making the TAP pipeline vulnerable to potential attacks. Furthermore, religious tensions and sectarian divides in the region can complicate negotiations and cooperation among the participating countries. Different religious and ethnic groups may have varying interests and concerns regarding the pipeline's development and operation, which can lead to conflicts and delays in project implementation. In addition to these security and social challenges, religious factors can also impact the perception of the project among local communities. Ensuring that the pipeline benefits local populations and respects their religious and cultural values is essential for gaining support and mitigating potential opposition (Price & Hakimi, 2019).

3.5.6 Talibanization

The issue of Talibanization presents a significant challenge and potential threat in the context of regional projects like the TAP pipeline. The resurgence and influence of the Taliban in Afghanistan have raised concerns about the security and stability of the country, through which the pipeline is intended to pass. Talibanization, characterized by the implementation of strict laws and the influence of extremist ideologies, can create an environment of uncertainty and instability. The Taliban's control over certain areas along the pipeline's route can pose security risks, potentially leading to attacks on the infrastructure or disruptions in its operation. Moreover, the presence of the Taliban can complicate negotiations and collaboration among the contributing countries. Ensuring the safety of the pipeline workers and the security of the project in areas with Taliban influence requires delicate diplomacy and security arrangements (Sharma, 2019). The potential impact of Talibanization on the project extends beyond security concerns. It also raises questions about the project's long-term viability and the ability to maintain stable and peaceful operations in an environment marked by political and religious extremism. The military strikes on September 11, 2001, were aimed at destabilizing the Taliban government in Afghanistan, so it could be seen as another attempt by the US politicians to seize control of the region to extract gas and oil from CA.

3.5.7 Various oil outlets

The diverse array of oil outlets plays a pivotal role in shaping the multifaceted challenges and implications that Asian markets encounter.

Given the heavy reliance of Asian economies on oil imports to satisfy their burgeoning energy demands, these outlets have a profound impact, introducing a spectrum of opportunities and hurdles. Foremost among the challenges are the volatile nature of oil prices and the underlying factors influencing these fluctuations. Asian markets remain acutely sensitive to the production decisions and geopolitical dynamics that affect global oil prices. The presence of multiple outlets, including influential entities like OPEC and non-OPEC oil-producing nations, means that changes in supply, demand, or international relations can trigger significant price volatility. This volatility can have far-reaching consequences, affecting not only economic stability but also policy planning in Asian nations (Cheng et al., 2023). Besides, supply reliability emerges as a central concern in the context of diversified oil outlets. While diversification is aimed at enhancing energy security, it also introduces the challenge of ensuring the reliability of oil sources. Geopolitical conflicts, trade disputes, sanctions, or shifts in diplomatic relationships with oil-producing countries can disrupt the complex supply chains that serve Asian markets. Ensuring a consistent and dependable flow of oil requires extensive infrastructure and transportation networks, with the absence of which, delays and supply shortages can result, creating vulnerabilities for energy-dependent Asian economies. On the other side of the spectrum, diversified oil outlets offer a range of implications that influence the dynamics of Asian markets. One notable implication is price competition. The presence of multiple outlets fosters a competitive environment, compelling oil producers to offer competitive pricing. This competition benefits Asian consumers by potentially lowering oil prices, which, in turn, can help contain inflation, stimulate economic growth, and improve overall economic stability in the region (Cherp et al., 2012).

Furthermore, diversification of oil suppliers enhances energy security by reducing the reliance on a single source. Asian markets become less susceptible to disruptions stemming from geopolitical shocks or supply constraints in a particular region. This increased flexibility and resilience are fundamental for maintaining energy stability, crucial for the sustained growth of Asian economies. Nevertheless, the pursuit of diversified oil outlets necessitates careful consideration of various geopolitical, diplomatic, and environmental factors. Asian nations must navigate complex geopolitical landscapes to establish and sustain relationships with multiple oil-producing countries. Additionally, they need to balance energy diversification with environmental sustainability goals. Different outlets may adhere to varying environmental standards and practices, potentially affecting a country's commitment to transitioning toward cleaner energy sources (Mohsin et al., 2018).

3.5.8 Asian-Pacific markets

The Asian-Pacific markets, often referred to as the Asia-Pacific region or APAC, represent a dynamic and influential economic landscape with profound implications for global trade and investment. Encompassing countries from East Asia to the Pacific Islands, this region is characterized by its diversity in terms of economic development, cultures, and political systems. One of the key features of Asian-Pacific markets is their rapid economic growth. Many countries in this region have experienced significant economic expansion over the past few decades, contributing substantially to global GDP. Nations like China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore have emerged as economic powerhouses, while emerging economies such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia continue to attract international investments (Coën et al., 2023).

Moreover, the Asia-Pacific region is a hub for global manufacturing and trade. Its extensive supply chains and industrial production networks have made it a central player in the global economy. The region's robust export-oriented industries encompass electronics, automobiles, textiles, and more, making it a critical driver of global trade. Asia-Pacific markets are also characterized by their embrace of innovation and technology. Countries like Japan and South Korea are known for their advancements in electronics and robotics, while China has rapidly grown its tech sector. The region is at the forefront of 5G technology, artificial intelligence, and fintech, shaping the future of various industries worldwide. However, the Asia-Pacific region is not without its challenges. Geopolitical tensions, such as the US-China rivalry, have implications for trade and investments in the region. Environmental concerns, including pollution and climate change, are pressing issues that require attention. Additionally, socio-economic disparities within the region, from developed economies to developing nations, present unique challenges for policymakers (Ing & Kimura, 2017).

3.6 Export routes for CA

3.6.1 East to China: Prohibitively long?

Export routes are critical for the trade of goods, and the question of whether it is prohibitively long to export from the east to China is a pertinent one, particularly for countries situated in East Asia. The distance and transportation times associated with shipping goods from East Asia to China can indeed be considerable, but whether it is prohibitively long depends on several factors. First, it's essential to recognize that the concept of ‘prohibitively long’ varies depending on the nature of the goods being transported and the urgency of delivery. For bulk commodities or goods with lower time sensitivity, the longer transit times may be acceptable. However, for perishable goods or those with time-sensitive market demand, longer routes can be a significant drawback (Bennett, 2014). The length of export routes from East Asia to China can also vary depending on the specific starting and ending points. For instance, exporting from Japan to China involves a shorter distance compared to exporting from countries further south in Southeast Asia. Advancements in transportation infrastructure, including high-speed rail networks and improved road systems, have reduced transit times for certain goods. Additionally, the development of efficient logistics and supply chain management practices can mitigate the challenges posed by longer export routes. Trade agreements and economic integration efforts, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aim to improve connectivity and reduce transit times between East Asia and China. These initiatives involve the construction of infrastructure projects like railways, highways, and ports that facilitate trade and reduce transportation times (Athukorala, 2009).

3.6.2 Indian Ocean route

The Indian Ocean route is a significant maritime trade route that connects countries situated along the Indian Ocean's coastlines and serves as a crucial conduit for global trade. This maritime highway has historical and contemporary importance, impacting the economies and geopolitics of the countries flanking the Indian Ocean and beyond. Historically, the Indian Ocean route, often referred to as the ‘Monsoon Marketplace’, facilitated extensive trade and cultural exchanges between countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The monsoon winds allowed for efficient and safe navigation across the ocean, enabling the movement of merchandises such as spices, textiles, precious metals, and cultural ideas. In modern times, the Indian Ocean route remains a vital artery for global trade. It connects some of the world’s most crowded and rapidly developing countries, including India, China, Indonesia, and the countries of the Middle East and East Africa. This route enables the transportation of goods, energy resources, and raw materials, supporting the industrialization and economic growth of these nations (Pandya et al., 2011).

The Indian Ocean route is particularly critical for energy security, as a significant portion of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments pass through this region. The Strait of Hormuz, located at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, is a pivotal chokepoint where a substantial portion of the world's oil supply transits. Geopolitically, the Indian Ocean region has garnered increasing attention due to its strategic significance. Major Powers, including the US, China, India, and Russia, have vested interests in maintaining stability and influence in this area. Naval presence, infrastructure development, and diplomatic initiatives are all part of the geopolitical dynamics shaping the Indian Ocean. Environmental sustainability has become a growing concern along the Indian Ocean route.

The region is at risk to climate change, with rising sea levels and extreme weather events affecting coastal communities and infrastructure. Sustainability efforts, such as marine conservation and addressing plastic pollution, are gaining importance in this context (Dasgupta, 2018).

3.6.3 Afghanistan route: The best one

The Afghanistan route, also known as the 'Heart of Asia' route, is a historically significant and geographically strategic trade corridor. However, whether it is the 'best' route depends on various factors and the specific context of trade and connectivity goals. The Afghanistan route passes through a region with complex geopolitical dynamics, including security concerns and political instability. Ongoing conflicts and border disputes can disrupt trade and create uncertainties for businesses. The security condition in Afghanistan has been volatile, with the presence of armed groups and insurgencies. This can pose significant security risks to trade and transportation along the route. The Afghanistan route requires substantial investments in infrastructure, including roads, railways, and border crossings, to facilitate trade. Infrastructure development has been ongoing, but progress has been hindered by various challenges (Dasgupta, 2018). There are alternative routes for trade and connectivity in the region, such as the Gwadar-CA route and the Iran-Pakistan-India route. These routes offer different advantages and disadvantages, and the choice of the 'best' route depends on specific trade goals and regional partnerships. The effectiveness of the Afghanistan route can be influenced by the diplomatic and political relations between countries involved. Bilateral and regional cooperation agreements play a crucial role in ensuring smooth trade along this route. The suitability of the Afghanistan route may also depend on the type of goods being transported and the markets being targeted. Some goods may be better suited for overland routes, while others may benefit from maritime transportation (Yousaf et al., 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that recent developments suggest a continued trend of diminishing Russo-phobia and Islamophobia, along with a more scrutinized view of the United States' monopolistic tendencies. This shift in perception has had significant ramifications for the Central Asian Republics. Turkey continues to leverage its ethnic and linguistic ties, while Iran's influence seems to pivot more on traditional socio-cultural connections rather than ideological ones. Russia's approach remains rooted in its historical imperialistic tendencies, and Pakistan plays a crucial role through its Islamic kinship and strategic partnerships, like the CPEC, which adds complexity to the region's political dynamics. The study thus reached the following concluding points.

1. In assessing the geopolitical nuances of CA, factors such as economic potential, geographic location, environmental concerns, and the rise of radical Islamic movements in neighbouring countries like Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are pivotal. These elements have consistently shaped the responses of major global powers to the region. Each nation, both regional and global, appears to be strategically positioning itself to establish a sphere of influence in CA, a region rich in natural resources and of strategic importance.
2. Pakistan has been proactive in its diplomatic efforts to secure a prominent role in the politics of CA. This is aimed at boosting its economic standing while also trying to limit India's influence in the region. Despite varying opinions on its effectiveness, Pakistan's strategy includes plans to establish a Trans-Asian Axis, considering the strategic importance of regions like the Xinjiang province in China.
3. Geographically, Pakistan has an advantage over India due to its proximity and more direct trade routes. The operational status of the Karakorum Highway, which passes through Afghanistan and the Xinjiang region, underscores this point. However, the unstable political climate in Afghanistan and the fluctuating situation in Tajikistan have posed challenges to Pakistan's aspirations. In addition, there is a level of skepticism among Central Asian states towards purely financial or religiously driven alliances, highlighting the need for a more nuanced approach.
4. There is an ongoing narrative by some global strategists to accentuate the fear of Islamic expansion to disrupt economic unity among Muslim-majority countries. In response, there is a growing emphasis on Asian-centric perspectives, advocating for increased economic collaboration within the Indo-Iranian and Indo-Pak-Afghanistan spheres, potentially extending to Central Asian Republics. This concept envisions a broad-based Asian alliance that could foster economic partnerships beyond bilateral frameworks.
5. In the current scenario, fostering economic cooperation seems imperative for reviving the Central Asian economy. However, this model should aim for collaboration rather than confrontation. In a world that increasingly rejects unilateralism, cooperative efforts are seen as more constructive and less likely to exacerbate the negative impacts of globalization.

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