

Revivalism of Silk Routes: CPEC and South Asia-Central Asia Connectivity

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Abstract

Silk Routes remained central to the connectivity between Turkestan (Today's Central Asia) and Hindustan (Today's South Asia) throughout the history. Whether it was trade or military expeditions, this region remained at the hub of all such activities. Many of the rulers and invaders to Hindustan came either from Afghanistan or Turkestan. With the disintegration of former Soviet Union and emergence of independence Central Asian states, Pakistan got an opportunity to interact with these states but due to domestic, regional and international political situation, Islamabad could not draft a sound and successful policy towards the region. With the introduction of OBOR and especially CPEC, Pakistan got a golden opportunity to gain central position in South Asia-Central Asia connectivity.

This article tries to explore the areas of cooperation and conflict between South Asian and Central Asian regions and the prospects for future connectivity between the two. It would try to address questions; what is the current state of relationship between Pakistan and Central Asian states? What are the impacts of Afghan instability on south Asia-central Asia connectivity in general and Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity in particular? And what are the prospects of South Asia-Central Asia connectivity through CPEC? Interpretive, critical and explanatory approaches would be used for this research and both Realism and Complex Interdependence theories would be applied.

Keywords: Silk Road, CPEC, South Asia, Central Asia

Introduction

Silk routes have been major source of connectivity between South and Central Asia for thousands of years. Due to the advent of maritime routes and later on colonization of both Central Asia (then Turkestan) and South Asia (then Hindustan) which resulted in (in)famous 'Great Game' this connectivity got a set back and reached to almost zero after the creation of Soviet Union. The independence of Central Asian Republics (CARs) in 1991-92 provided opportunity to both the regions to revive their centuries old socio-cultural, political and economic relations. Nevertheless, political issues in the form of Afghan instability and India-Pakistan relations could not let bridge the gap. Another major issue hindering this connectivity is the weak physical infrastructure in both the regions especially transportation network in Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is no second thought that economic development in the modern times depends amply on transportation infrastructure. Since South and Central Asian governments lack resources to build modern state of the art transportation network,

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rise of China as economic power and its interest to develop transportation infrastructure in the form of “One Belt One Road (OBOR)” has given hopes to both the regions to revive connectivity.

Since histories the current region of Pakistan and Afghanistan have been at the center of commercial land routes connecting China with modern day Central Asia and the west and Mesopotamia, Iran and Arab world. This piece of land also connects South to West and Central Asia (Khan, 2016) since 3-2 B. C. caravans used to travel through the cities of Silk Routes like Samarkand, Bukhara, Osh, Andijon, Peshawar, Dehli, Kashgar, Isfahan, Istanbul and so on. Pakistan connects all these regions with each in modern times as well. This connectivity involves “energy, trade, transportation and tourism.” (Anwar, 2016) As one of the central routes of OBOR, China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has provided an opportunity to Pakistan to re-activate its connectivity within these regions. It will not provide Pakistan with economic development only but political and social development as well. It will enhance Pakistan’s soft image in international community. Interest of several extra-regional countries to join CPEC has increased its importance. Such kind of connectivity will bring Pakistan back to its economic track and political and social stability.

Chinese constructive engagement in South and Central Asia plus Afghanistan has resulted in development of roads and railways infrastructure, thus bringing both the regions closer to each other. CPEC will further strengthen this engagement as the project include fiber optic cable connecting Pakistan and China, special industrial zones, besides construction of transportation networks and Gwadar international airport. (Hanif, 2016)

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

While introducing OBOR, President Xi declared that the principle of “peaceful cooperation, openness, mutual learning, mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, civilisational tolerance, respect for each country’s choice for developmental path and economic model” (Xiguang , 2016) would be the outcome of this project. Since China wants to develop its western region especially Xinjiang region, it is very important for Beijing to connect this region not only with mainland china but to its neighbors as well. As china imports 90 percent of hydrocarbons to fulfill its energy needs primarily from Central Asia, the Middle east, Persian Gulf and the East African countries, Xinjiang gets extreme geo-economic and geo-strategic importance for china due to its proximity to most of these regions.

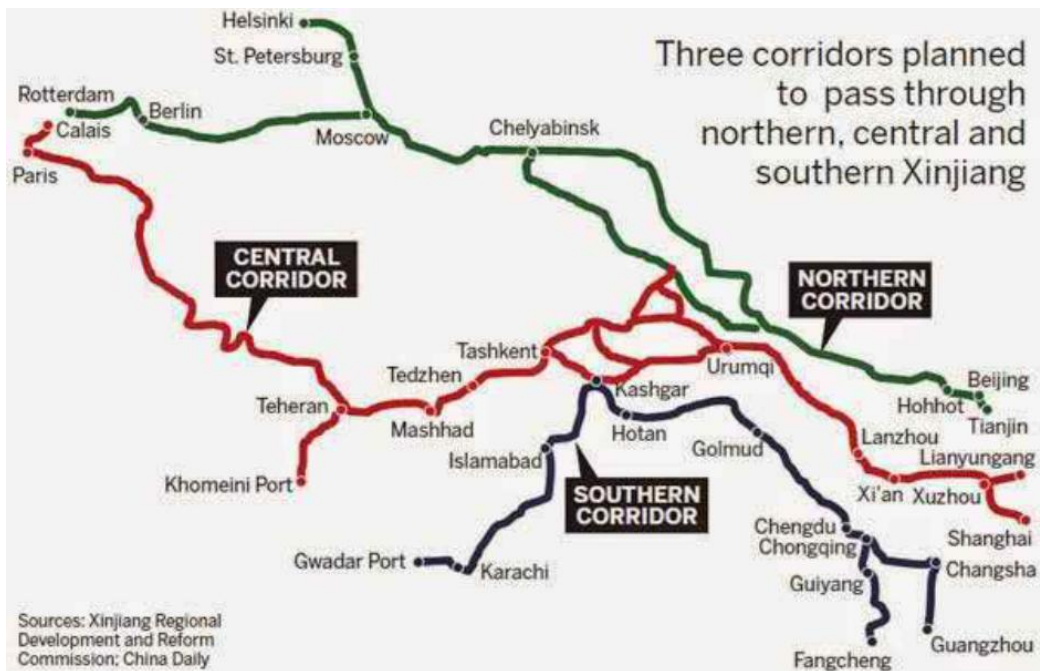
Since almost fifty-two states have showed their interest in CPEC project, it can contribute into the global economic success besides Pakistan’s economic and infrastructural development. The project has not only caught the attention of Pakistan and Afghanistan but Russia, Central Asian states and east European states are also keen to see its success. The president of Pak-China Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCJCCI) stated to media that “\$100 billion investment both from China and

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other countries is expected as soon as infrastructure projects under CPEC are completed.” (Ahmad, 2016)

CPEC project has four major areas of investment; communication, trade policy, trade facilitation and energy. OBOR and its corridors will not only help increased trade opportunities among the member states but will also increase the living standard of people. Central Asia being rich in energy reserves and hydrocarbons, is a priority area for energy starving Pakistan. Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have lots of gas reserves. Kazakhstan has oil in abundance and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are rich in hydro-electricity, all the Central Asian Republics (CARs) are importance for Pakistan. Besides economic and energy relations, Pakistan and CARs enjoy centuries old ideological and cultural relations as well.

Figure 1 *One Belt One Road: Three Corridors*



Source: China Daily (Beijing), June 28, 2014.

In order to get a smooth supply of these hydrocarbons and export of its goods, China has initiated bilateral as well as multilateral projects to develop physical infrastructure especially transportation network in South and Central Asia including Afghanistan. Currently China is developing Xinjiang in order to bring it with par with central and eastern regions of China. This development, according to Chinese regime, will help out to minimize insurgency in Xinjiang region. (Dixit, 2015) The stability of this region will ensure the smooth economic and trade activities through it. China is also

interested to invest in the neighboring states of Xinjiang region in order to minimize the external influences on Uighurs lives.

China in Central Asia

Central Asia has unique position in the region not only in geo-economic but geo-strategic terms as well. The ‘Great Game’ of late nineteenth century has been replaced with so called ‘New great Game’ primarily for economic interests in terms of hydrocarbons of the region. Currently the main players of this new great game are deemed as USA and China besides Russia and other regional powers like India, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey.

Large number of hydrocarbons in Central Asia besides containing terrorism in Afghanistan along with containment of China and Russia has forced Washington to keep a constant eye and presence in this region. US led war on terrorism provided an ample opportunity to the US to deploy its forces in Karshi-Khanabad (Uzbekistan), Manas (Kyrgyzstan) and Dushanbe (Tajikistan) to support coalition forces engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan. Although, Washington remained critical to Central Asian regimes for their human rights violations especially after the 2005 Andijon (Uzbekistan) killings at the hands of state security forces, it, nevertheless, managed to engage itself with CARs, especially Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in Northern Distribution Network (NDN). NDN was created after the halt of NATO supply after terrorist attacks on NATO supply in Pakistan. Authorities in Islamabad blocked this supply on a couple of occasions besides Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI) blockade to NATO supply in Pakistan. US still has its military base in Manas.

Russia considers Central Asia as its backyard. Later remained the former’s colony for more than a century. The whole region was ‘Russified’ by Stalin and after its independence; the region still depends largely on Russia. Moscow was quick to offer security under the umbrella of Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS) in 1992 to the fragile CARs. Even today despite their utmost efforts, CARs could not come out of the Russian influence. Transport infrastructure between CARs and Russia is relatively good, thus has increased their connectivity. A large number of Central Asian works in Russia and immigrant workers. This connectivity has increased the chances of Moscow to join CPEC during the later stage.

“China has been a major player for the infrastructural and economic development by building roads, tunnels, railway tracks, power lines and oil refineries in Central Asian states. China has also been instrumental in development of the two most important Central Asian road connections of Osh-Sarytash-Irkeshtam and Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan respectively. The Irkeshtam Pass crosses through the Osh–Sary Tash of Kyrgyzstan to the Kashgar in China. Whereas, the Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart road is the other most significant transportation link route connecting the Kyrgyzstan”(Brohi, 2016) construction of Dushanbe-Chanak highway

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in Tajikistan, and electrification of Ahengran-Pop railway line in Uzbekistan are also important projects by China (Shahbazov, 2017). The investments of China have been significantly increased from \$1 billion to about \$50 since the independence of CARs. (Javed & Rashid, 2016)

Since Central Asia is central to the OBOR project, its stability guarantees the success of the project. The region connects Asia with Europe through Iran-Turkey and Russia; key routes of OBOR. Similar importance the CPEC has as it not only connects China to the Middle East and Africa but is the shortest maritime route for China while using Gwadar Port. CPEC can be a milestone for CARs after Soviet disintegration and lifting up on 'Iron Curtain.' CARs have great hopes in the project as it will provide them with another alternative to international markets. CPEC is a milestone for CARs as "it will accelerate their development and progress. As developing industries demand new markets; technological innovations facilitate international cooperation; better transportation and logistics increase trade efficiency; and growing energy demands require international cooperation, (CPEC) projects will act as a catalyst towards generating regional cooperation, building political flexibility, enhancing economic growth, offering trade diversifications, investing in transportation, mining and energy sectors." (Hali, 2016)

CPEC and South-Central Asia Connectivity

The current volume of trade between Pakistan and CARs as a whole is negligible. The estimated GDP of CARs is around \$251 billion. Current trade volume between Pakistan and Kazakhstan is around \$33 million per annum. This figure is around \$ 24 million only with Uzbekistan (largest market of CARs). Both Pakistan and Uzbekistan have agreed to increase the trade volume up to \$ 300 million during the next five years. (Khan, 2016) Most important development in trade relations has been seen in Pakistan and Tajikistan case. The volume of trade between the two countries has increased from merely \$ 18 million in 1998 to \$ 89 million in 2015. Due to its close proximity and land connections, Chinese trade with CARs has increased from \$ 460 million in 1992 to \$ 50 billion (Khalil, 2017) and this trade volume is believed to get double through OBOR.

Interestingly India's trade volume with CARs is very healthy. According to estimates, New Delhi's trade volume with CARs is little less than \$ 20 billion. Opening up of Chahbahar port in Iran has provided an opportunity to India to increase its bilateral trade with CARs. With the introduction of CPEC, Islamabad would be in a better position to trade with CARs because of the enhanced land connectivity. Chinese constructive engagement in Afghanistan in terms of infrastructure development has also great hopes to bring Pakistan and Cars closer to each other.

Bilateral trade between Pakistan and CARs need much attention. There is huge potential to increase the volume of this trade. Major exports of Pakistan to CARs are crops and agricultural products like wheat, cotton, and sugar besides exporting cement

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and medicines. Nevertheless, there is huge potential of trade between Pakistan and CARs. Pakistan can export “textile products, mineral fertilizers and some other technologies while CARs can export hydrocarbons, machine tools and parts and metals to Pakistan.” (Saud, 2013)

According to Amjad Rasheed, a leading exporter to Afghanistan from Pakistan, “from cement to light engineering goods to jewelry, stationary, food items, cosmetics and handicrafts we can export anything and everything to the Central Asian states once we resolve logistic issues. We can import wheat, cotton, fuel oils, oil products, natural gas and electricity, chemicals and iron ore, iron and steel, rare earth metals and food processing plants from CARs.” (Saud, 2013) The most important impediment to achieve that level of trade is less opportunities of connectivity in the form of non-availability of transportation networks and instability in Afghanistan. Regional states are keen and sincere in their efforts to resolve both these issues through cooperation.

Although few but much needed important and modern highways have already been built by China in Pakistan as well as CARs, the chances of connectivity between South and Central Asian regions have increased manifold. While saving time, energy and fuel, it will help to increase the trade volume between both the regions especially between Pakistan and CARs.

Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) are two important programs to develop infrastructure and connectivity between South and Central Asia. CAREC has five corridors connecting Asia with Europe. According to Ishaq Dar, Pakistani Finance minister “Once the six CAREC Corridors (CAREC Energy Strategy identified five potential energy corridors in Central Asia which included Central Asia – East Asia, Central Asia – South Asia, Intra-Central Asia, Central Asia – Russian Federation, and Central Asia – European Union) and major seaports start providing access to the global markets, they will deliver services that will be important for national and regional competitiveness, productivity, employment, mobility, and environmental sustainability.” (Associated Press of Pakistan, 2016) the Central Asia-South Asia Corridor is considered as one of the most effective and much needed corridor.

The 5th RECCA conference held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in 2012 emphasized on connectivity. The major focus of this conference remained on five key areas “infrastructure (transport and energy), human resource development (including vocational training and labour market facilitation), investment and trade (including transit and border management), regional disaster risk management, and regional fiber optic connectivity.” (Linn, 2012) RECCA in 2016 states “explore concrete linkages between the USD \$43 billion CPEC and steps to transform Afghanistan into a regional trade and transit hub.” (RECCA) Addressing to the 15th CAREC Ministerial Meeting in Islamabad, Ishaq Dar stated, “the CPEC offers a massive opportunity for connectivity between Central Asia, Middle East and Africa and is bound to play a

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defining role in the economic development of our region.” (Associated Press of Pakistan, 2016) 7th RECCA Conference held on 14th and 15th November 2017 at Ashgabat reaffirmed “that regional economic cooperation and integration offers broad opportunities for growth, and can assist with exploiting and developing the long term economic potential that exists in Afghanistan and the wider region; and stressing the need for further advancing regional economic cooperation as an effective means to achieve economic prosperity in Afghanistan and the wider RECCA region.” (RECCA)

The west especially US is interested in connectivity of Afghanistan with its northern and southern neighbors. Besides backing RECCA, Washington has introduced the “New Silk Road Strategy” and Northern Distribution Network (NDN). The New Silk Road (NSR) initiative of the US is focused on Afghanistan as a main hub for economic integration and transportation. In 2012, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Geoffrey Pyatt stated that the New Silk Road Strategy helps the regional connectivity. It facilitated “electricity from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan powering small businesses and government buildings in Afghanistan; rail connections being built between Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan and a new rail line from the Uzbek border to Mazar-e-Sharif; Turkmen, Pakistani, and Indian officials’ finalization of pricing agreement for the TAPI gas pipeline.” (Kuchera, 2011)

During a visit to India in 2011, then Secretary of States Hillary Clinton stated, “[Let’s build] an international web and network of economic and transit connections. That means building more rail lines, highways, [and] energy infrastructure, like the proposed pipeline to run from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan, Pakistan into India (TAPI). It means upgrading the facilities at border crossings. And it certainly means removing the bureaucratic barriers and other impediments to the free flow of goods and people.” (Maini, 2014)

Connectivity between South and Central Asia heavily depends on Afghan stability. Beijing is really concerned about it. China is engaged in Afghanistan through political and economic initiatives through ensuring border security of Afghanistan and investment into the Afghan economy. China is also involved in the Quadrilateral Coordination Group on Afghan peace process. (Stanzel, 2017) Beijing has also facilitated negotiations between regime in Kabul afghan Taliban. (Mudabbir, 2016) From 2001 to 2013, China had provided Afghanistan with roughly US\$240 Million in development assistance before pledging a massive US\$ 80 million for the year 2014 alone. The two countries also inked an agreement on Technical Cooperation worth US\$76 Million during Abdullah Abdullah’s visit to China. (Stanzel, 2016)

China has been able to secure extended leases to the sites based on the Build, Operate, and Transfer (BOT) agreement with the respective governments. This particular means is suitable for the host country and also increasingly desirable for them because of the development potential that it entails as well as the prospect that the developed site will eventually be returned to the host government but this time, fully functioning with the capacity to continue exploiting the reserves.

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The Mes Aynak Copper Project was leased to China on a similar premise for a period of thirty years where China would be responsible for setting up the infrastructure and import machinery needed to mine the copper, in addition to establishing a coal reservoir as well as a power plant to make the site largely independent of the national grid for its energy needs. (Mathews, 2009) China plans to invest more than US\$ 3.5 Billion into the project as per the latest estimates, making it the single largest infrastructure project in the country and a much needed perpetual boost to Afghanistan's subpar GDP earnings. (Shahid, 2009)

Another key project with the potential to completely alter Afghanistan's fortunes is the Amu Darya Oil River Basin Project that has been awarded to China's state owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). (Rahimi, 2015) According to initial surveys and estimates, the basin could hold upwards of 87 million barrels of oil. (Khan, R., 2015) China has shown keen interest in the project because it could allow China to explore Afghanistan as an alternative oil supplier which would allow them to procure oil at cheaper rates, minimize transportation costs and bypass the risk of sanctions and blockades by third parties. (Khan, R., 2015) The Amu Darya Oil River Basin Project is a means of getting the foot through the door, once the project is successful, it is expected that China will be interested in undertaking several more surveys of sites with significant potential reserves. (BBC News, 2011)

All the regional states (except India) not only support CPEC but desire to join it as well. There are reports that Moscow has shown desire to join the project. It is said that Russian intelligence agency chief alongwith the chief of Federal security Services visited Islamabad secretly and formally requested both Islamabad and China for Moscow's entry into the project. (Tikhonova, 2016) Afghanistan also considers the project as key to development for the whole region. Former Afghan ambassador to Pakistan Janan Mosazai, stated that Kabul "supports [the] China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. We would like to link up with it. Kabul is ready to facilitate the linking of Central Asian countries with the corridor." (Khalil, 2017) Having massive hydrocarbons, Kazakhstan having 30 billion barrels of crude oil and Turkmenistan having 265 trillion cubic meter of natural gas, (Siddiqui, 2017) and substantial energy power, CPEC will provide CARs an opportunity to diversify export of their hydrocarbons to energy deficit South Asia. This project will provide them with a strategic opportunity to export competitively in international markets besides "fostering regional economic and trade connectivity. (Shahbazov, 2017)

During his visit to Pakistan in December 2016, Uzbek Deputy Prime Minister Ulugbek Rozukulov supported CPEC and stated that Tashkent is ready to join the project. Since Uzbekistan has proven oil reserves of 66.2 trillion cubic meter, OBOR and CPEC can double the production and export of Uzbek gas to international markets. Chinese National Petroleum Company (CNPC) is busy updating old and outdated Uzbek gas pipelines. CNPC is also busy in exploring new gas fields and construction of new pipelines. Similar views were expressed by Turkmen president.

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“The CPEC is a project that will guarantee progress and prosperity in the region” (Shahbazov, 2017) Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Turkmen president stated in March 2016 in Islamabad. CASA-1000 project will also enhance connectivity between the two regions. Another proposed energy transportation project from Central Asia to Pakistan through Afghanistan is TUTAP (Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan) power transmission project. This project is also backed by Asian Development Bank (ADB). Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan 500-KV line project has also been signed in 2016. There are huge prospects for optic fiber connectivity (OPC) between Pakistan and CARs as Afghanistan is already connected to Pakistan and CARs through OFC.

Despite having Chahbahar, potentially a competitor to Gwadar, Tehran has never objected on CPEC. One of the reasons is that China has a great deal of trade with Iran. China has helped Iran in its nuclear program as well. Iran is a potential importer of oil and gas through CPEC. Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline can serve as Iranian gas supplier to China. Current China-Iran trade volume is \$ 51.8 billion which will be increased to \$ 600 billion in the next ten years. (Khan, A., 2017) Furthermore, Chinese trade with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is around \$ 170 billion. (Khalil, 2017)The project will definitely increase the volume of trade between the two.

Pakistan does not rely solely on CPEC for its trade with CARs. Pakistan and CARs are engaged in constructing new routes through Afghanistan. Kabul has also offered support to both the parties in this regard. Pakistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan have identified Sherkhan-Ninjayan border route as a new transit route between Pakistan and Tajikistan. Pakistan desires to construct a railway line from Gwadar port to Afghanistan through Quetta and Chaman which will be connected to CAREC corridors. Similarly, Afghan government has proposed a railway link between Khost in Afghanistan and Miranshah and Bannu in Pakistan. As a pleasant surprise, Kabul has also proposed a new rail link between Helmand (Afghanistan) and Gwadar (Pakistan) through Yakmuch and Punjgoor. Afghanistan is agreed to do the feasibility study of the project as well. Once these new rail links are established, Pakistan will be connected to Central Asian railway through Afghanistan. Rs. 90 million have been approved by National Highway Authority (NHA) for PC-II feasibility study of Peshawar-Kabul Motorway project. There is a proposed railway project by China connecting China with Iran through Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Out of 2100 KMs “estimated 1148 Kilometers of the proposed rail corridor will pass through the Afghan provinces of Kunduz, Balkh, Jawozjan, Faryab, Badghis, and Herat.” (RECCA) Once operational, these linkages will definitely enhance South-Central Asia connectivity manifold.

Potential Issues

Despite bright future, there are some serious issues for the connectivity between the two region. These issue range from Terrorism and extremism to Afghan instability and ‘The New great game’ to Indian and American concerns over CPEC. Without the

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help of USA and India, peace building in current Afghanistan is impossible. Instability in Afghanistan the gravest concern for the connectivity of these two regions. Although, connected through China, best land route for South-Central Asia connectivity is Afghanistan. There is a grave concern over terrorism and extremism in both the regions as both regions alongwith China and Russia face this menace for a long period of time.

Recently there has been a steady decline of Afghan trade through Pakistan. Issues between two countries and constructing of new alternative routes for Afghanistan through Iran has cost a lot to Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA). According to deputy minister of finance and commerce of Afghanistan, “in 2008-2009 nearly 60 percent of Afghan imports were transited from Pakistan, but now, in 2016, it is not even 30 percent. On the other hand, nearly 15-20 percent Afghan imports were transited from Iran in 2008-2009 but it is now 37-40 percent.” (Khalil, 2017) From 2012 to 2014, around 33% of APTTA products were Chinese exports to Afghanistan.

Keen to invest abroad, Chinese investors as well as Chinese bank officials and private companies are really concerned about their investment abroad. Their fears revolve around unknown environments and systems. This has put them in a situation where they felt it really hard to deliver on to these projects besides building local partnership. Nevertheless, they are obliged to pursue the desire of Xi Jinping to complete OBOR. (Pantussi, 2017) There are also speculations in Pakistan about the transparency of CPEC project as well as shared costs and benefits of the project. The other issues may include the potential cost of border crossings in terms of legal and informal, infrastructure bottlenecks and most importantly behind the borders especially poor logistics, police barriers and illicit fees.

Future Prospects

There are great hopes associated with CPEC. As most of the countries of Central Asia are co-members of Pakistan in different regional and international organizations, the CPEC project is being discussed at multiple forums among different states. Role of Shanghai Cooperation Organization can be important as all the member/observer states will be connected through OBOR. All Central Asian states and Pakistan are members of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), a dead horse, and Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC). This common membership, especially of ECO can also enhance the credibility and efficiency of CPEC project. CARs, and Russia are also aware of the importance of Gwadar and cannot afford to lose it for their future economic development. Gwadar Port will definitely help CARs to connect their Hydrocarbons to international markets.

A Quadrilateral Transit Traffic Agreement between China, Pakistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is in effect since 2004 but its ineffective most of the times. Chinese investment into transportation network in Pakistan and Central Asia will help in the

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effectiveness of the project. Recently in December 2016, Pakistan joined Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia in Lapis Lazuli Corridor which will connect Pakistan with Turkey through these countries. (Siddiqui, 2017) Improved security situation in Pakistan and opportunities of investment. According to Manzoor Elahi, a Pakistani exporter to Uzbekistan, “a stable Afghanistan can provide Pakistan an opportunity and corridor to reach the CARs. No trade agreement will be fruitful, if Afghanistan is missing from it,” (Saud, 2013) China also wants a stable Afghanistan. President Xi Jinping wants to involve SCO into the Afghan peace building and reconstruction, he stated that “(The SCO) should take it as our own responsibility to safeguard regional security and stability, enhance our ability to maintain stability, continue to boost cooperation on law enforcement and security, and improve the existing cooperation mechanisms.” (Tiezzi, 2014)

CPEC will help Pakistan exploring Baluchistan’s natural resources especially, hydrocarbons with estimated reserves of 29 million cubic feet of natural gas and around 6 billion barrels of crude oil. (Anwar, 2011) There are negotiations between Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan for the introduction of a trilateral trade agreement while Kazakhstan is thinking to open Consulates in Bandar Abbas (Iran) and Gwadar (Pakistan). All the regional countries consider terrorism and extremism as a common threat has attracted the regions towards each other to cooperate against this menace. Regional connectivity and increased people to people contacts will surely reduce this threat as well. Shifting regional alliances especially close relations between USA and India has also forced China and Russia to get closer to Pakistan and Central Asia.

According to Ishaq Dar, “There is a huge trade potential in Afghanistan and five Central Asian states, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with combined gross domestic product (GDP) of \$ 445 billion and population of 66 million, offer a sizeable market for Pakistani goods, services and investment.” (Siddiqui, 2017) Former Pakistani Prime minister Nawaz Sharif also stressed on the connectivity through road, rail and air between South and Central Asia. He said connectivity is “crucial for regional integration and the promotion of bilateral trade, tourism, and people-to-people contacts.” (Mishra, 2017)

Conclusion

Once operational and successful, OBOR will transform the world geo-economy and geo-strategy. There are “multiple security threats, regional backlash and rivalry with the ‘status quo’ of world powers which stand to lose their cachet because of it.” (Parkash, 2006) Despite such hurdles, OBOR will connect the world economies. CPEC, being a part of OBOR provides great opportunity for connectivity between South and Central Asian regions. This connectivity is multifaceted; economic, trade, energy, political, social, cultural and ideological. But this connectivity needs modern and hi-tech transportation network which will bring people and markets closer to each other. CPEC is definitely going to bridge this gap as China has heavily invested into

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the road and railway infrastructure of both Pakistan and CARs. Beijing has a constructive engagement in Afghanistan as well. Both Pakistan and CARs support a stable and peaceful Afghanistan, which is a guarantee to South-Central Asia connectivity. China's thinking of connectivity will also reduce the threats of terrorism and extremism in the region as broader connectivity will bring people closer to each other and reduce misunderstandings among them. CPEC would surely serve this Chinese strategy. In the long run, countries like India and USA will also join the project.

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