

Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia and its Implications for Pakistan

NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability
2021, Vol. 4(2) Pages 52-67



njips.nust.edu.pk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37540/njips.v4i2.95>

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Abstract

China has been developing new commercial tracks worldwide to make its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) productive and to physically and economically link the neighboring CARs with itself. In this regard, China has been taking collaborative actions towards CARs to establish business linkages and building forward-looking infrastructure. Reciprocally, the welcoming gestures of the CARs towards these arrangements are becoming conspicuous. On the contrary, the West calls it Chinese efforts to put CARs in a strategic loop by helping their ailing economy. This paper, therefore, attempts to explore the advancement of BRI and the responses of the Central Asian Republics (CARs) towards this new development. In addition, the evolving situation shows that increasing partnership between the CARs and China significantly impacts the foreign and domestic policies of Pakistan because China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is aligned with the BRI policy documents. Consequently, any new development in BRI will have substantial trickle-down effects on Pakistan. In this context, this article further examines the impact of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), as a core of BRI, on Pakistan. henceforth, the article reviews regional connectivity projects under BRI and calculates the potential impact of BRI on the political, economic, and societal spheres of Pakistan.

Keywords

BRI; CPEC; Central Asia; connectivity; Pakistan; China; regional cooperation; peace

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is substantially magnifying the political and economic influence of China around the world. Xi Jinping, the President of China, has vowed to interconnect different world regions with its land through BRI. To accomplish its goal, the Chinese administration is pouring a significant amount of resources, and the value of the investment is approaching nearly four trillion dollars. BRI tends to connect almost 70 countries and more than two-third of the world's total population (Hillman, 2018). With the announcement of the BRI project in Astana Kazakhstan (now Nur-Sultan) in 2013, the worth of the Central Asian region has also

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been strengthened. In return, the Central Asian Republics (CARs) also took the BRI project as a bountiful opportunity to connect themselves with international markets. Some researchers have taken this project contentiously; anticipating that problems of a debt crisis, inter-state conflicts, and Chinese dominance would rise with growing geographical integration (see e.g., Bhattacharya, 2016). Conversely, the cooperative gestures of partner states have given birth to a new controversy.

The response of the Chinese neighbors, including Pakistan and CARs, was welcoming to BRI. This reaction of CARs is not a surprise as two principal land routes (namely central and northern routes of BRI) pass through this region to Europe, which would boost commercial ties among the states. More so, the rail link of China and Europe, passing through Kazakhstan, has been constructed which has subsequently triggered an increased flow of goods and reduced the delivery time (Russell, 2019). Similarly, the Central Asian countries have shown an inclination towards their Southern states. Pakistan and CARs have already signed several energy infrastructure projects. It is primarily assumed that in the wake of BRI, linkages between Pakistan and CARs will grow in terms of geographical connectivity, technical collaboration, and people-to-people contacts. This latest knowledge transformation to upgrade infrastructure and a new mechanism for sustainable economic growth will benefit Pakistan as well as CARs.

In 2013, one component of BRI, namely the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), was presented as an infrastructural initiative that sought integration of CARs not only with each other but also with China (Reeves, 2018). In 2017, during the Belt and Road Forum (BRF), the Chinese president affirmed that SREB is ideal for China-Central Asia integration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). However, several questions arise as to why China chose this region. In this regard, intellectuals have presented policy prescriptions rather than scholarly explorations. Broadly, the geopolitical location of the Central Asian region has gotten a central position in the interplay of connectivity projects and East-West/North-South links (Joshi & Kumari, 2017).

However, the decades-old instability and insecurity in Afghanistan have hindered the intended trade (UNESCAP, 2015). For example, during the Taliban regime in Kabul, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project was initiated, but it could not be materialized because of security risks. The other viable sea trade route for CARs could be through Iran, but it has been almost impossible for them to conduct their international trade through Iranian ports due to international sanctions on Iran. Thus, the two remaining options of land routes to conduct international trade were through China and Russia. Since China does not connect to any region by land in its east and international trade through China to the Pacific Ocean to connect global markets would be costly, the Central Asian region appears viable for the transportation of Chinese goods to the world market. However, historical legacy and geographical proximity had essentially made CARs dependent on Russia. While knowing the significance of other viable trade routes, CARs endeavored to reduce their dependence on Moscow to chart out new foreign and trade policies. Likewise, bilateral agreements with distant states on trade would likely be expensive for CARs if they pass through multiple tariff barriers.

Such a complex situation has pushed CARs to look for feasible alternatives. Initiation of BRI has given high hopes to the governing bodies of Central Asian states that they will be able to connect with the international markets in a better, easy, and economical way. The central route will connect this region to Europe through Iran

and Turkey. The route foments new ties between neighboring CARs, secures China's interests, and generates economic opportunities for CARs. And therefore, the commercial links are expanding partnerships and inviting states for new agreements. An example of this is the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) among Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, and Pakistan which has been signed to facilitate transit traffic. Since the central route initiates from the Xinjiang Autonomous Region (XAR) of China, it provides Pakistan an opportunity to connect itself with the markets of CARs as XAR is connected with Pakistan through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which is a flagship project of BRI. Unequivocally, Islamabad was already exploring new means of energy sources for which it had signed several agreements with CARs. In this connection, TAPI, Central Asia-South Asia 1000-Megawatt (CASA-1000) energy project, Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TUTAP) electricity project, and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) electricity projects are worth mentioning (Saleem, 2018).

The shortest route for Pakistan to reach Central Asia is through Afghanistan, but Islamabad could not fully utilize the geographical potential of this region due to constant volatility in Afghanistan. Given that there will not be stability in the region without peace in Afghanistan, neighboring CARs and great powers have been working together to strengthen Afghanistan; Pakistan has also been playing a crucial role in these efforts of regional stability.

In this background, this paper engages with relevant literature on BRI and responses of CARs. The paper contributes to the existing literature by presenting facts about the under-construction and planned connectivity projects in detail. This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- (i) How is Chinese-led BRI integrating the Central Asian region geographically and economically?
- (ii) How can increased economic activity in Central Asia influence the efforts of Pakistan for regional connectivity?

This study is qualitative in nature and is based on secondary sources that offer a framework of the regional connectivity plan of China under BRI in Central Asia. Several books, articles, reports, official and other important websites have been consulted for academic investigation.

Essentiality of Geographical Connections through Central Asian Region

Central Asia has been dubbed as the next 'Middle East' by analysts in terms of its hydrocarbon resources. For instance, Kazakhstan has crude oil in abundance especially on its Caspian shores besides iron, uranium, and gold while Turkmenistan is ranked among the highest natural gas producers. In addition, Uzbekistan stands within the top five gold-producing nations in the world. It also has substantial natural gas reserves whereas Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are rich in water resources (Dorian, 2006). Notwithstanding the abundance of resources, CARs depended on Moscow for their energy exports due to their landlocked geography. However, their dependency has been reducing with the construction and operationalization of new oil and gas pipelines, originating from the Central Asian region and extending to China.

Unequivocally, the Central Asian region has been at the helm of Eurasian trade through which a significant volume of goods transferal became possible (Ceceri, 2011). At the end of the 20th Century, the efforts to use the silk route as a trade link were re-activated by different states, including the United States, China, and Russia.

The concept of the revivalism of the ancient ‘Silk Route’ was presented by the United States before China. The U.S. vision of greater Central Asian economic integration first surfaced in 2011 (McBride, 2015) when the U.S. defense planners concluded a series of negotiations with the local governments of CARs. It was promised by the leaders of CARs to facilitate the opening of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). The original plan was to transit non-lethal supplies to Afghanistan through CARs, and there would be no return leg from Afghanistan (Cooley, 2012). Despite all the U.S. efforts, the strategy of NDN and New Silk Road could not be implemented as desired because of certain impediments, including instability in Afghanistan and the competing plan of China for developing energy resources in Central Asia.

Nevertheless, the ancient Silk Route restoration became possible when China announced the BRI project in 2013. China smartly presented its initiative to the world as an accommodating economic project created to benefit all aspirant states along with several other states where its effect would be indirect but positive. The promise of substantial investments by Beijing also drove several new infrastructural and energy projects in Pakistan. The ambitious CPEC that connects Pakistan’s Gwadar Port with Xinjiang province, carrying US\$62 billion Chinese investment (Garlick, 2018), is believed to generate enormous benefits for Beijing by consolidating its position in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region. This shows the centrality of the neighbors of China for the geographical connectivity of China.

Owing to the importance of the Central Asian region, President Xi Jinping announced the BRI project in Astana, Kazakhstan (Bitabarova, 2018). The choice to uncover this megaproject in a seemingly low-profile state indicates the worth that China reckons for Kazakhstan. As per the plan, the central and northern routes of BRI, which are promising opportunities for their associates, are to run through Central Asia to European markets. It is already established that BRI has five priorities — financial integration, connecting people, policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, and unimpeded trade (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2020).

BRI primarily focuses on the connection of Xinjiang with Central Asia. Since the longest western border of China is with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the integration of CARs into international markets seems to be an inevitable future. Afghanistan and Pakistan are also making their western border through which China can connect to the Middle East and Europe through the land (Yellinek, 2020). The BRI project is an extension of the New Silk Road initiative, which claims to be a win-win initiative for all the stakeholders. China assures that under BRI, bilateral as well as multilateral mechanisms will be materialized. According to the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission, “The Belt and Road Initiative is a systematic project, which has to be built together through consultation to represent the interests of everyone” (Stec, 2018, p. 2).

Increased Economic Activity in Central Asia

The Chinese policymakers rank Central Asia into their priority regions. This is due to its strategic and economic significance for China as the Xinjiang Autonomous Region (XAR) is geographically connected with Central Asia (Niquet, 2006). Overall, XAR connects China with eight neighboring states: Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. For the sake of its security, it has become essential for China to develop this region. Chinese wisdom maintains that investments in infrastructure generate economic growth, and therefore, it

emphasizes an advanced security environment and tries to create social stability. Thus, the stability of its neighboring states requires commitment. For this purpose, China has invested millions of dollars in development projects in Central Asia, most notably in transportation networks; the overall investment of Beijing in the Central Asian region is around U.S. \$50 billion (Javed & Rashid, 2016). China has also significantly invested in building infrastructure, such as constructing dams, power transmission lines, tunnels, and oil refineries, besides roads and rail tracks. Some notable constructions related to the road network include Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart Highway that connects Kyrgyzstan with XAR, Osh-Sarytash-Irkeshtam Highway, and Dushanbe-Chanak highway (Brohi, 2016). Moreover, China has also invested in the electrification of Angren-Pap railway line in Uzbekistan (Shahbazov, 2017). This railway line has reduced the distance between Angren and other parts of Uzbekistan by hundreds of kilometers. The East-West connection within Uzbekistan makes people's movement easy; thereby, China and CARs connections are to brace.

Since SREB is rapidly integrating Central Asian states, it also tends to expand the economic connections of China across much of Eurasia through vast infrastructure and investment schemes (Hongzhou, 2015). Moreover, China uses SREB at both — the bilateral and multilateral — levels to expand its economic activities in Eurasia but with a significant focus on the Central Asian region.

Contextualizing SREB in China-CARs Relationship

Being energy-rich and having a substantial market of 65 million inhabitants, the Central Asian region has economic importance for China. Initially, China was more interested in settlement of border disputes with its neighboring post-Soviet states. Later, Beijing also started focusing on economic ties with Central Asia. Henceforth, the then Chinese Prime Minister revealed his economic policy towards Central Asia in April 1994 during his visit to Almaty. The strategy declared the following objectives: “equality and mutual benefits acting according to economic laws; Diversifying the types of cooperation; Proceeding from the actual situation and making full use of local resources; Improving the conditions of communication and transportation, building a *New Silk Road*; Providing modest economic aid to the CARs as an expression of friendship; and developing multilateral economic cooperation (Zhuangzhi, 2007, p. 50; see also Cheng, 2011).

SREB, being an overland arrangement of infrastructure corridors for passing Chinese goods to European markets through Central Asia, has now become the mainstay of BRI. SREB also links China to the vast raw materials of Eurasia; including the rare-earth minerals of Afghanistan, oil and uranium deposits of Kazakhstan, and natural gas of Turkmenistan. Thus, to build a regional supply chain, China intends to restructure the economy of CARs and its own western Xinjiang province. The response of CARs to SREB shows their excitement towards the new economic prospects that SREB brings, but at the same time, some concerns are being raised concerning the speedy expansion of China in the region. This anxiety is seemingly due to the clear roadmap of SREB (Zhang, 2015).

Overall, the relations of China with CARs have largely been cooperative since their independence. And today, their relationship is not confined to economic and trade activities; rather it also encompasses cooperation in security, power sector, infrastructure development, regional integration, health, and education sector. For successful materialization of the ‘Path of Light’ development strategy of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan and Beijing agreed and indicated in a meeting of higher officials, held in

2015, to identify areas of convergence between the ‘Path of Light’ and SREB projects (Xinhua, 2015). Both the states “have agreed to deepen their existing currency swap agreements, to establish currency settlement mechanisms, to coordinate payment agreements, and to set up a Chinese–Kazakh Investment Fund, all within the SREB framework” (Reeves, 2018, p. 506). Near the Aktau port in the Caspian Sea in Kazakhstan, China has also invested in establishing the China Industrial Park (Xinhua, 2014). Besides, Kazakhstan is also a major source for the import of uranium for China. For these reasons, Kazakhstan is denoted as the “Buckle of the Belt”; it is a well-situated state to make China a pivot (Grant, 2019).

Chinese authorities have shown interest to expand their cooperation with Kazakhstan in all fields. Under SREB, Beijing intends to increase people-to-people connectivity and socio-cultural linkages. Under this initiative, Silk Road Education Fund has also been established by China. Through this fund, scholarships to Central Asian students and Chinese language centers in Kazakhstan and other CARs have been founded (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). A Free Trade Area has also been established at Altynkol–Huoerguosi on the Kazakh border with China (Reeves, 2018). Other areas of bilateral cooperation under SREB include cyber security, information security, military-technology cooperation, and the potential manufacturing of Chinese weapons in Kazakhstan (Reeves, 2018).

Table 1. Number of China’s BRI and Bilateral Projects in Central Asia (Till 2019)

<i>Sectors</i>	<i>Total no. by sector</i>	<i>Kazakhstan</i>	<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>	<i>Tajikistan</i>	<i>Uzbekistan</i>	<i>Turkmenistan</i>
Total by Country	261	102	46	44	43	26
Trade & Industrial Development	131	61	17	17	24	12
Rail & Road Connectivity	51	14	11	16	5	5
Energy Connectivity	48	20	5	7	12	4

Source: Aminjonov(et al. (2019)

Having a complex physical topography and less resources of hydrocarbons, Kyrgyzstan had been struggling for economic uplift since its independence in 1991. SREB has given high hopes to Bishkek as billions of dollars have been poured, under this project, into the Kyrgyz transportation network, construction of gas pipelines, and up-gradation of transmission lines. Beijing has also suggested to establish the ‘Silk Road Economic Zone’ between the two states (Reeves, 2018). To utilize soft power, Beijing has also invested millions of dollars in giving scholarships to Kyrgyz students. Similarly, Confucius institutes have also been established in Kyrgyzstan (Dayu, 2014). Besides, security agreements have also been made between the two states; for Chinese personnel and investment safety.

China and Tajikistan have also marked similar kinds of agreements. These include constructing highways, railway lines, oil and gas pipelines, oil refineries, cement plants, trade and investment, and security agreements. During the last 24 years the exports of China to Tajikistan have increased at an annualized rate of 21.6%, from \$14.6M in 1995 to \$1.61B in 2019 (OEC, 2021). Turkmenistan is also

an important state contributing to the regional dynamics; along with preserving the policy of positive and permanent neutrality in external relations, it wants to become a hub for regional transportation. In this regard, SREB has provided a window of opportunity to Ashgabat to consolidate its relations with regional states and also with broader global regions. It is stated that

Turkmenistan stands ready to intensify exchanges between the two governments, parliaments and in non-governmental areas, deepen cooperation in economy, trade, energy, transport, logistics, communication, high-technology, people-to-people and cultural exchanges, and international affairs, and take an active part in the *Belt and Road* construction (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016, para.7).

Under SREB, the expansion and capacity enhancing of existing hydrocarbon pipelines are being done. The Turkmenbashi Port (in Turkmenistan) also provides China with an alternative route for its trade with Europe and beyond.

According to Central Asia Regional Data Review 20, China has poured millions of dollars into the region of Central Asia (Aminjonov et al, 2019). Table 2 provides the details of the total investment of China in CARs-related projects.

Table 2. Total Investment of Chinese Projects in Central Asia (Million USD) until 2019

	<i>Total by Country</i>	<i>Rail & Road Connectivity</i>	<i>Energy Connectivity</i>	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Agriculture & Food</i>	<i>Mineral & Petroleum Exploration/Processing</i>	<i>Finance & IT</i>	<i>People-to-People Projects</i>
<i>Total by Sector</i>	136251.06	23499.74	35693.8	12299.55	1 451.88	55 159.65	8 100	46.44
<i>Kazakhstan</i>	90 862.43	14539.3	18849.5	10545.5	1029.63	37778.5	100	NA
<i>Turkmenistan</i>	24842.5	1402.5	410	NA	NA	14	03	NA
<i>Tajikistan</i>	10518.7	4515.9	4516	6798	342	465	NA	NA
<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>	5391.68	1773.04	2713	150.8	31.55	676.85	NA	46.44
<i>Uzbekistan</i>	4635.75	1269	205.3	923.45	28.7	2209.3	NA	NA

Source: Aminjonov et al. (2019)

Being the largest market for Chinese goods and having substantial gas, gold, uranium reserves, and cotton production, Uzbekistan holds a key position to China’s SREB. To connect Uzbekistan with China, Beijing has invested in the internal infrastructure of Uzbekistan and has also facilitated it to connect with other states in the region. In 2016, China constructed the Kamchiq Tunnel in Uzbekistan, which unites Angren with Pap; China further intends to extend this rail link through Kyrgyzstan (Hashimova, 2020). Currently, the cargo is not being transported through railcars, but trucks pass through the middle section, i.e., Kyrgyzstan and later join the railroad in Uzbekistan. Moreover, with the Chinese investment, Special Economic Zone is being established in the Jizzakh region of Uzbekistan (Gazette of Central Asia, 2013). Several other bilateral agreements have also been signed under SREB. These agreements cover trade, infrastructure development, security-related matters, and scholarships for students.

From the above-given facts, it appears that China — under SREB — is inking bilateral agreements with CARs to build multiple infrastructures and to speed up regional integration through cooperation. The volume of trade between China and Central Asia has been increasing since 2001. Moreover, trade and economic cooperation between China and CARs are being made through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in which its business council plays a pivotal role. Several multilateral agreements have already been concluded in this regard.

Economic Engagements of China with CARs

The rapid Chinese industrial development has led to massive energy consumption. At present, China is the second-largest energy consumer in the world. It is also the largest energy importer in the world, as it meets most of its needs through imports. With the transformation from coal to alternative means, China is now in dire need of importing hydrocarbons. China is well aware of the significance of the Central Asian region which is rich in energy resources. Beijing was successful in striking deals with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to construct oil and gas pipelines from the shores of the Caspian Sea to the Xinjiang region of China. Uzbekistan also became a party to the gas pipeline as it also passes through it. Later, Line C and D have also been constructed which has further enhanced the shipping capacity along with the provision of hydrocarbons to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

It is not only China that wants to bring CARs into its economic orbit but also Russia and the United States. Different initiatives have been taken in this regard. Besides Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and SCO, Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) are also important initiatives; these forums aim to bring broader connectivity between the South and Central Asian regions. During a visit to India in July 2011, the then-Secretary of States Hillary Clinton hinted towards the new US Silk Road vision during a speech in Chennai:

Let's work together to create a new Silk Road. Not a single thoroughfare like its namesake, but an international web and network of economic and transit connections. That means building more rail lines, highways, energy infrastructure, like the proposed pipeline to run from Turkmenistan, through Afghanistan, through Pakistan into India. It means upgrading the facilities at border crossings, such as India and Pakistan are now doing at Waga. In addition, it certainly means removing the bureaucratic barriers and other impediments to the free flow of goods and people. It means casting aside the outdated trade policies that we all still are living with and adopting new rules for the twenty-first century (Laruelle, 2015, para 12).

Besides, it is becoming evident that the integration of the South and Central Asian regions is contingent on peaceful and stable Afghanistan. Therefore, China is spending a significant amount on Afghanistan for infrastructural development; including transportation networks, technical cooperation, industrial development, mineral resources, and the security sector (Stanzel, 2016). Similarly, CARs have also shown interest in connectivity with Afghanistan; Uzbekistan has connected the Afghan city of Mizar-i-Shareef with Termez in Uzbekistan by constructing a railway line. This line would be extended to Herat in western Afghanistan to connect with Mashhad in Iran, and to Kabul in the south to connect with Peshawar in Pakistan. China is also interested in constructing a railway line to Iran via Afghanistan. Regional states also support the proposed Turkmen railway line to Tajikistan through Afghanistan.

It can be anticipated that the economic growth of CARs is linked with increased trade, among which each state has its unique potential. For instance, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan can export their hydrocarbons to South and Southeast Asian regions through Pakistan. Likewise, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan can export their hydroelectricity to Pakistan and India through well-constructed infrastructure in the region. In this way, transitioning skills and knowledge will develop new processes and products, which is a portent of stability.

Security Engagements of China in Central Asia

China has adopted a new approach to secure its Western border (Xinjian) after the announcement of BRI. However, almost no official communication about this development is available. Nevertheless, scholars rationalize that China is prioritizing its security under BRI. Realizing the importance of cooperation in the field of security for better economic opportunities, CARs and Beijing (after concluding border agreements) focused on the broader security realm. The first manifestation in this regard was the signing of the Shanghai-5 agreement when China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan agreed to cooperate in the domain of security. It was later transformed into SCO when Uzbekistan joined in 2001. In 2007, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan signed 'Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation for development of Central Asia in the XXI' with China. Having threats from extremism, terrorism, separatism, drug trafficking, and organized crimes, China and CARs have joined hands to mitigate these issues jointly. Beijing has carried out joint military exercises with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to combat terrorism. Afghan-Tajik border is the most porous in the region. It has a total length of 1206 kilometers while there is only one guard per 50 kilometers (Bolovina, 2019), making illegal crossing easier. Since the infiltration of terrorists from Afghanistan to China is primarily through these two states, China has paid significant attention to improve the border security.

Beijing has also to re-align the BRI project amid internal borders and water conflicts of CARs, which is also mounting the cost of the project. It is observed that a part of the population of these states is also skeptical about the nature of the BRI project, and it tends to grow (Wemer, 2019). The reason being that the people are worried about the trickle-down effects of this project. Isolated violent clashes between the local and Chinese workers have also been reported in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Other problems include illegal Chinese workers stationed in these states, leasing property for long term by local people, inter-marriages, and differences in the salaries of local and Chinese workers. In addition, there are concerns related to the lack of transparency in profit (e.g., debate around BRI from 'neo-colonialism' perspective).

There is a substantial difference of perception between the ruling elites and general masses of the region regarding BRI projects. The public has mixed feelings of progress and the potential challenges for the societies of CARs. On the other hand, the ruling (or political) elite is largely pro-BRI projects (Chen, 2015). However, 'elites' of the region also do not want total or excessive dependence on China for their industrial and infrastructural development (Laruelle, 2018). There are also some other concerns about Chinese investment in CARs among the general masses. These include harsh treatment of the Uighur community at the hands of Chinese authorities in Xinjiang, secrecy about the BRI projects, and Cold War information fed into the minds of the Central Asian population that China is an evil state (Laruelle, 2018).

Implications for Pakistan

Notwithstanding a long history of strong political ties between Pakistan and China, trade has been uneven. However, the BRI project has given birth to a new ray of hope in Beijing and Islamabad. The spurt of infrastructure development under BRI in Central Asia has significant implications for Pakistan, some of which are analyzed in detail here.

First, it appears that the Central Asian markets are likely to be integrated with the market of Pakistan, but the evolving development is annoying India; therefore, the existing fissures between Pakistan and India are being widened. It is argued that Pakistan has been facing heightening tension on its eastern and western borders because of Indian efforts to sabotage CPEC. India is also trying to defame Pakistan by calling it a terrorist state on the international forum to stop investors from joining BRI or CPEC. India has also shown its terror-expanding posture by removing the special status of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019 (Aamir, 2020). China reacted to Indian action and took it as an offense against its sovereignty; so, both Chinese and Indian forces brawled in disputed Pangong Lake, Ladakh, in September 2020. In a broader sense, this situation is becoming detrimental to regional peace and security.

Second, CPEC, which is a flagship project of BRI, and BRI, as a whole would complement each other for intra- and inter-regional trade purposes. The broader regional connectivity is to opening trade, and new economic opportunities will roll up for better functioning of the BRI projects. Hence, Pakistan would also be able to provide new jobs at domestic level, as the projects related to CPEC are underway (Zia & Waqar, 2017). Additionally, CPEC would be a solution to economic snags due to the landlocked area of CARs. It is anticipated that CPEC will also pick up the pace of the development work and progress of CARs.

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, p. 35).

Third, wide-ranging commercial activities would require new technology and skills. Hence, BRI-associated proficiencies would impart new knowledge and skills to industry owners and workers of Pakistan. Furthermore, the latest technologies will steer innovative thinking for business & trade, and creativity would befall firms and companies. Henceforth, digital transformation is being envisioned in Pakistan.

Fourth, the trade volume between Pakistan and CARs is likely to increase with the completion of CPEC. However, currently, the situation is grim because the total trade volume between CARs and Pakistan is less than US\$ 1 billion despite having ample opportunities. On the other hand, India has more than US\$ 20 billion in trade with CARs, whereas Chinese bilateral trade with CARs has surpassed US\$50 billion (Khalil, 2017). Pakistan primarily exports cement, and pharmaceutical and textile products to CARs; reciprocally, CARs can export hydrocarbons, machine tools, and metals to Pakistan. Amjad Rasheed (a leading exporter to Afghanistan from

Pakistan) believes that trade volume will grow in the future (as cited in Saud 2013, p. 196):

[F]rom cement to light engineering goods to jewelry, stationary, food items, cosmetics and handicrafts, we can export anything to the CARs 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.

Fifth, there are expectations that the completion of the BRI project will also expedite the materialization of TAPI and CASA-1000 projects. Furthermore, geographical connectivity projects have the potential to improve bilateral relations between the partner states. For this reason, Afghanistan has also proposed Pakistan the construction of railways from Helmand (Afghanistan) to Gwadar (Pakistan) and from Khost (Afghanistan) to Waziristan and Bannu (Pakistan), although there is much skepticism about the connectivity. Once Afghanistan's transportation network is expanded and upgraded, there are greater chances to expand it to other neighboring states. This opportunity would open new doors for Pakistan to expand its trade with CARs and beyond. It would also help CARs make their international trade through Pakistan, where infrastructure has been improving under the CPEC projects since 2016.

Sixth, increasing cooperation between states is also contributing to improving the internal security situation of Pakistan. Moreover, through BRI, China is gaining its security objective by building capacity of Pakistan to act as a counterbalance to India (Small, 2017). In addition, Beijing supports the intra-Afghan dialogue process contingent on regional peace (Mudabber, 2016). In this regard, China has provided billions of dollars in aid or assistance to Afghanistan after 9/11 (Stanzel, 2016). Soon after the announcement of CPEC, China and its three bordering states, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, signed Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) to combat terrorism; further advancing security cooperation (Kucera, 2016) and making area secure for commercial activities. Thereafter, significant achievements were made in the security sector, and hideouts of terrorists were destroyed.

Seventh, Pakistan has no chance of messing up with its neighbors; therefore, a careful reading of implicit messages of its neighboring states is direly needed. Empirically, the neighbors of Pakistan know the importance of BRI-connected CPEC to grow the economy and trade. For instance, the then Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan stated in 2016 that Afghanistan "supports 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, para. 14). Similarly, official statements of the heads of CARs validate their positive views on CPEC and BRI; even their aspiration to join the projects is vivid.

Finally, with the fast-growing projects of BRI, India is trying to dismantle the growing attachment of China-Pakistan with CARs by supporting a discord in Balochistan (which is regarded as the heart of CPEC because of its deep seaport) and making a loud clamor to present CPEC as a scandalous project. For the same purpose, India has invested a considerable amount in the infrastructure building of Afghanistan to prop up its government against Pakistan and to make Pak-Afghan border controversial. More so, paramilitary forces have also been deployed there to protect

its assets and personnel (Muzalevsky, 2015). In this emerging scenario, Pakistan has to deal with new foreign policy predicaments as the stiffness appears to grow.

Conclusion

BRI has visibly increased the economic activities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan and also impacted the relations between China and Pakistan. However, the major impediment to Pakistan-Central Asia trade is instability in Afghanistan, lack of transportation network, and little regional integration. The recent Chinese investment in the economy of Afghanistan and the desire of Pakistan to expand CPEC to Afghanistan has given high hopes for a smooth trade. Conceivably, the constructive engagement of China aims to ameliorate the economies and infrastructure of its bordering states, which would facilitate the integration of the Central and South Asian regions.

BRI projects have provided opportunities for CARs to take advantage of their natural resources, especially hydrocarbons. They all realize the importance of availing new avenues to export the hydrocarbon resources to international markets. For Pakistan, it can be expected that new vistas of businesses are available in the broader Eurasian region, and people-to-people cooperation would eventually steer unique collaboration in trade. The recently agreed Pakistan-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan railway line project — connecting Peshawar (Pakistan) with Termez (Uzbekistan) through Kabul and Mizar-i-Shareef (Afghanistan) — would surely bring CARs much closer to Pakistan.

It is expected that the BRI projects will lead to broader integration of the South and Central Asian regions, in the form of physical and transportation infrastructure networks, for which regional states do not have resources. Once Pakistan is well connected with CARs, it can facilitate in further expanding its reach and explore its potential in the Russian market as well. The up-gradation of the ML-1 project in Pakistan is seen as a great opportunity by CARs to boost their international trade. Increased regional connectivity would also help develop shared responsibility to resolve the Afghan crisis, which, in turn, is expected to significantly contribute to the development of the whole region, particularly Pakistan.

Since BRI is mainly working as an instrument to build economic cooperation among regional states, soon the maintenance of peace and stability will be taken as a shared responsibility by all the member states to safeguard their mutual interests. Thereby, states would try to make good use of infrastructure, and reimbursements would make each member responsible for putting best possible efforts to make BRI successful. The pragmatism would also ensue technical cooperation. In the light of the envisaged phenomenon, Pakistan needs to understand that religious and cultural ties with CARs are insufficient, but it should work on economic, technical, and scientific aspects while dealing with them.

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