

IMPORTANCE OF PAKISTAN-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

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Abstract

Central Asian region assumes greater importance for Pakistan not for a single reason of historical relationship but there are many factors which induce Pakistan to keep Central Asia as a priority area in the shaping of foreign policy. Since the independence of CARs, various strategic and economic interests have become a significant objective of Pakistan's policy particularly in the field of energy. For landlocked Central Asia also, Pakistan's importance is not without any reason. Along with historical and cultural ties which bring both the regions closer, the potential relationship in future can benefit them greatly. The role of the regional organizations and development of infrastructure on both the sides can increase the possibilities of stronger interaction in all the fields. Both Central Asia and Pakistan hold great importance for each other and the changed geopolitical and strategic position has enhanced this significance immensely. This paper analyzes the importance of Central Asia and Pakistan for each other in view of the historical and cultural relationship. Moreover various motives of Pakistan in the region have also been discussed. The problems and challenges which Pakistan is facing and can face while competing and involving in CARs in the presence of other regional and international players form part of the research and there are various policy options which can work best for Pakistan if adopted in a true sense and with full commitment.

Key Words: Pakistan-Central Asia, Caspian Sea, CARs, Policy options, Economic Interests

1. Introduction

Central Asia is that region of Asia which extends from the Caspian Sea in the west to central China in the east, and from Russia in the north to northern India in the south. Central Asia sometimes is also known as Inner Asia. Acting as a crossroad for the movement of goods, and people for a long time in the past, the modern Central Asia consists of five Central Asian Republics i.e. Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan. Pakistan is strategically located at the juncture of Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia and is separated from Central Asia by Wakhan Strip of Afghanistan. The emergence of Central Asian Republics created a new phase of relationship between Pakistan and these Republics. Though in the beginning Pakistan's approach was quite indecisive but soon she recognized these Republics keeping in view their greater economic, political and strategic significance. The changed regional and global strategic environment has made it more important for Pakistan to compete and to maintain stronger ties with Central Asia because both strategically and economically Central Asia can prove best for Pakistan's interests. In view of the great historical and cultural links, Pakistan and Central Asia can boost their potentials and their cooperation can be a model in the region as well as in the world but still there are few constraints which haunt this relationship to be established on sound basis. Before we go into the details of those constraints, it is very important to discuss the history of relations between Central Asia and the areas now forming Pakistan because no doubt the past relations did have a greater influence on the present cooperation and would affect the future policies of both the Central Asian Republics and Pakistan.



2. History of Pakistan-Central Asia relations:

The need and importance of relations between Pakistan and Central Asia has always been felt not only because of any new trends in the international and regional political strategic policies but the past bond of religious, cultural and trade links provided the basis for establishing this relationship. The history of this relationship can be traced back to the 2nd century B.C up to 17th and 18th century when the nomadic people in both the areas established economic, cultural and religious links with each other and the Indus civilization now comprising Pakistan was part of the dynasties in Central Asia. Central Asia witnessed the rule of different empires which established their hold in the area extending from the Caspian sea to the Arabian sea including Pakistan's territory in the past. The first ever link was established between Central Asia and the people living in the parts now comprising Pakistan during the 2nd and 3rd centuries when the nomads of Central Asia i.e. the Scythian Tribe came to Pakistan from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and through Taxila and Gilgit, they reached Sindh and left their cultural and social imprints there. After the Scythian Tribe came the Kushan dynasty covering a huge territory from the Caspian sea to the Arabian sea. During this period, the relationship between the sub-continent and Central Asia was so strong that present city Peshawar was the capital of Kushan dynasty during those days and was known as Purushapura.

It was also during this period that Shalwar Kameez was introduced in the region and later on became the National dress of Pakistan. The movement of the inhabitants from central Asia to the sub-continent became very common during this period. The period of Achaemenian and coming into power of Alexander the Great were the most special eras in the historical relationship between Central Asia and the areas now forming Pakistan. During this period many important regions like Parthia, Bactria, Khorezm and Indus became part of the vast Central Asian Empire. Next came the Hunnic Empire which gave land tenure reforms to the tribal people who later came to be known as Rajputs. Turkish rule was established by the Turkic Empire which came across Pamir and reached Nagir, Gilgit and Hunza. The areas of present Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa witnessed the formation of the Turkic Empire that time on the Indus extending from Kabul. With this empire came Islamic religion in the sub-continent and the Muslim rulers of the region linked Gilgit and Northern areas with Tashkent and Samarkand. The Ghazni and Ghori dynasties which were the successors of Seljuks, Karakhanids and Samanids strengthened the bond of Islam between the people of Central Asia and the surrounding region including the areas now forming Pakistanⁱⁱⁱ.

The Mongol empire came to settle new phases of relations with the introduction of military reforms in the sub-continent. The relationship continued on sound footing till the control of the Russians over Central Asian region and also the weakness of the Muslim rulers eroded the basis of sound relationship. The traditional and cultural relationship between Pakistan and Central Asia suffered a lot during the Colonial period when the rulers tried to dissuade the people of both the regions and political interaction was not left to take place. But despite their efforts, the British rulers failed to keep the two regions apart. The cultural and traditional regeneration of the Central Asians had a great impact on the people of the sub-continent. During the period of undivided India whenever Pandit Jawahir Lal Nehru visited Frontier Province (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), he used to say that crossing Attock bridge always gave him the feeling of being in Central Asia^{iv}. The coming into power of Tsarist Russia in the 19th Century also gave a setback to the economic ties between the two regions.

After the end of the Colonial rule and the division of the sub-continent, Pakistan and Central Asia faced another phase of relations which was not very much warm and despite all the cultural and historic relations, the two sides could not develop smooth relationship. The reason for this cold interaction was the fear of communism which prevented the two regions to move with political, social and economic cooperation. The Central Asian region went through complete change with greater impacts on her identity and was cut off from the Muslim world particularly from the southern Muslim region. The independence of Pakistan did not witness any boost in relationship because of Pakistan's joining of the Western Alliances against Communist Russia. The support of Pakistan for the Mujahideen in Afghanistan to oust the Soviet forces from there adversely affected the relationship between Soviet Union and the Muslim states which later became Central Asia. India on the other hand got greater advantage of friendly ties with Central Asia due to her peace and friendship treaty with Moscow. The period of 44 years before the independence of Central Asian states is known as unfriendly relationship between Pakistan and Central Asia. Despite all these cold interactions we still see some events when the relationship between Pakistan and Central Asia was revived e.g. after the Pakistan-India war of 1965, a declaration was signed in Tashkent in 1966 and confrontation between Pakistan and India came to an end.

The choice of the sight was definitely based on some historical importance of the relationship. The independence of Central Asian states in 1991 began a new era of political and economic relationship when both the sides felt the need to come closer to develop cooperation on wider basis. Pakistan also extended cooperation and financial support to Central Asian states in the shape of credits in the long term just after the independence of CARs^v. Though in the beginning Central Asian states were not very much inclined towards their Southern Muslim neighbors partly because of the fear of the extremist elements and partly because of their cold relations before their independence during the Soviet rule^{vi}. There was also another reason of Pakistan exposing herself as an Islamic state and broke herself loose from the past cultural and historical connections with Central Asia. But with the passage of time, they realized the importance of maintaining ties with the Muslim neighbors.

3. The Nature of present relations: Interests and Opportunities:

The present relationship between Pakistan and Central Asia is and can be of enormous significance because both the sides can gain greatly from the economic potentials of each other and can boost their social and cultural cooperation as they are blessed with natural and geographic potentials^{vii}. As far Central Asia, Pakistan's geo-strategic position is of great importance. The most significant and near route for Central Asia to the sea can be provided by Pakistan and Afghanistan. The economic interests of Central Asia can be boosted through Pakistan as the trade can be increased by air and by road. Most of the Central Asian capitals like Tashkent, Dushanbe, Ashkhabad, Almaty and Bishkek can use the Karachi seaport as the nearest one. The future regional economic stability and cooperation can be increased with strong ties of Pakistan and Central Asia. As for Pakistan, the importance of Central Asia cannot be ignored in any way. It was the realization of this importance that Pakistan recognized the Central Asian states and Afghanistan's stable government is in the interest of Pakistan only because of Pakistan's policy of gaining access to that region^{viii}. Various interests of Pakistan in Central Asia can be described as:

3.1. Strategic imperatives

Strategic interest is the most important factor of Pakistan's foreign policy towards Central Asia. Central Asia can be of greater strategic significance for Pakistan in the face of intense Indian hostility for Pakistan^{ix}. Furthermore the Indian desire to be dominant in the region also adds to Pakistan's attempt to find an economic zone in Central Asia. India too has her aims in Central Asia with the motive to find an economic market there and there is no denying the fact that Indian products are now having an access to Central Asia.

The development of road links through Afghanistan would certainly fulfill the hopes of Indian hegemonic position in the region. This increasing presence of India in Central Asia would undermine Pakistan's motives for political and economic integration in the region because India would in that case marginalize Pakistan. That is the reason that Pakistan wants a peaceful set up in Afghanistan and the involvement and support of Pakistan for Taliban in 1990s was the outcome of the same motive^x. The rising interests of the big powers in Central Asia and the changing American interests also are acting as the main causes for the change of Pakistan's policy as now Pakistan is striving to conclude an economic consensus among the Muslim countries of Iran, Turkey, Central Asia and Afghanistan to strengthen the strategic alliance and to counter the Indian hegemony in the region. It is the main policy of Pakistan to try to maintain stability in Afghanistan for attracting Central Asia for trade and economic ties. The Economic organizations with the membership of the Islamic countries in the region can strengthen this motive of Pakistan and no doubt ECO can work best to boost this cooperation^{xi}.

3.2. Economic Interests

The promotion of economic policies is also one of the most important elements of Pakistan's policy interests in Central Asia. It was this motive which compelled Pakistan to realize the importance of the Central Asian region and to offer about 30 million loan to these independent states in 1991. The geo-political location of Pakistan gives her an edge over other Asian states to promote the economic relations with CARs.^{xii} Pakistan can have access to Central Asia through Afghanistan and China as China's border is affiliated with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan and China can provide access to Central Asian states through these routes. Moreover Pakistan and China are also developing their relations through the Karakoram highway which can give a greater help in having access to the CARs. The trade relations through these routes would also have an important and positive impact on the Northern areas of Pakistan with greater chances of economic stability and integration. That is the reason that Pakistan wants stability in Afghanistan because without that the strategic motives of Pakistan with regard to Central Asia cannot be fulfilled.

Trade can be boosted between Pakistan and Central Asia as Central Asia can serve better for the import of energy resources to Pakistan and Pakistan can provide manpower and technical know-how to these states. Moreover the small and medium industries and consumer goods of Pakistan can find a big market in Central Asia and vice versa and joint ventures may be undertaken as the entrepreneurs in both the countries show their interests on many forums. The development of Gawadar Port is a big hope for Pakistan to achieve the economic integration in the region by serving as a transit trade facilitator regionally and internationally for Central Asia because Gawadar is located just at the cross roads of China, Middle Eastern region and the Central Asian states^{xiii}. The landlocked Central Asian states can gain a lot with the trade facilities provided by Pakistan by land and sea.^{xiv} The development of infrastructure has also been proposed between Pakistan and Central Asia and railway links are under consideration. Similarly the construction of roads and motorways particularly from Peshawar to Afghanistan and then to the Central Asian states is one of the plans to develop infrastructure to give a boost to economic ties.

The implementation of the plan of direct flights to various capitals of Central Asia has been a success for both the sides. Energy is the biggest issue facing the world today and every country is in the struggle to fulfill her energy needs. Pakistan is an energy deficient country and is in a greater need to look for the cheap and durable energy resources. 80 percent of commercial requirements are fulfilled by gas and oil in Pakistan and both these resources take an enormous share of foreign exchange earnings.^{xv} The domestic exploitation and exploration does not match the demands in the country. The importance of Central Asia in that regard cannot be ignored as a serious motive in the foreign policy of Pakistan. The gas pipeline plan from Turkmenistan can be implemented if the situation in Afghanistan becomes peaceful. But still the oil and gas companies like Bidas and Unocal are taking interest in the implementation of the project. Even USA is more interested in this project than the one between Iran and Pakistan. It was this motive of Pakistan that during 1990s, Taliban government was supported in Afghanistan and the future energy needs can be assured only when the peace is restored in the war torn Afghanistan.^{xvi}

4. Bottlenecks in developing relations

Though the hopes for developing cooperative economic, cultural and strategic relations is an important aspect of Pakistan's foreign policy but still there are many problems which both Central Asia and Pakistan are facing in increasing the level of interaction in all the important fields and to utilize each other's potentials. The various bottlenecks in improving the base of relationship can be described as:

4.1. Unrest in Afghanistan

The foremost problem and a hurdle in the way of good relations between Pakistan and CARs is the crisis situation in Afghanistan. The reason for this is that the main routes to Central Asia are possible through Afghanistan and without political stability in that country, neither Pakistan nor Central Asian states can move forward with the desired implementation of the plans to create a regional economic zone. The wars and instability in Afghanistan had a very negative impact on the trade and links between the two regions^{xvii}. Pakistan's support for the Taliban government in 1990s was not the outcome of any religious match of ideologies but was the policy to gain access to Central Asia. All the previous governments in Afghanistan were more friendly and cooperative towards India than towards Pakistan and that was the main factor which compelled Pakistan to change her policy and work for a pro-Pakistan government in Afghanistan. A severe criticism was also faced by Pakistan due to her policies with regard to Afghanistan but the motive was the same i.e. to reach Central Asian economically and culturally. The present disturbing situation in Afghanistan can be very damaging for Pakistan as the ethnic movements may create quagmire for Pakistan's tribal areas in Baluchistan and FATA. It is the need of the time for Pakistan to have a sense of the critical time and to work shrewdly towards the achievement of national and regional economic stability and for that Afghanistan would have to be peaceful because that works as an important corridor between Pakistan and Central Asia.

4.2. Economic problems of Pakistan

Though Pakistan hopes to implement the projects in trade, commerce and particularly in the energy sector in cooperation with the Central Asian states and Central Asia would also like to use the potential powers of Pakistan but the hurdle which Pakistan would face is the lack of financial resources due to which each and every plan and project cannot be moved forward with high hopes. The low level of literacy, weak industrial set up and technology barriers have restricted Pakistan to go ahead confidently to materialize the various significant programs of cooperation between Pakistan and CARs. No doubt Pakistan is very much in the need to gain the economic benefits from the energy rich Central Asia but the weak internal political and economic base makes a bigger threat to future hopes and plans.

4.3. Presence of other States in Central Asia

Another problem which Pakistan can face in her relations with Central Asia would be the increasing role of Iran and Turkey and many other Middle Eastern states. Like Pakistan, they also want to increase their cultural and economic cooperation with Central Asian states. Central Asia has become a focus of attention for most of the regional and Middle Eastern states because of the economic potential of the region. No doubt every state is in search of better economic opportunities in the world but that also creates a bigger challenge for Pakistan because the presence of other players in the CARs would undermine Pakistan's role in the energy rich Central Asia. And in case when already many hurdles are being faced in the maintenance of smooth relationship between the two regions. In this regard both Iran and Turkey are very active in Central Asia particularly. One of the most important aims of Iran's foreign policy is to become regional active player and for that Iran's strategy is the technological and economic regional cooperation. The same is the case with Turkey as an advanced Muslim country. Even the competition among Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey with regard to ECO has also negatively affected its progress. In such circumstances, Pakistan is facing a greater challenge and must have a strategy to follow her future aims and gain the economic strength in the region while extending cooperation towards Central Asian states.

The big powers involvement is another factor challenging Pakistan's future policies in Central Asia. The USA's interest in the region is increasing. Russian goals in these states also marginalize Pakistan's role in CARs. Many of these states are dependent on Russia even after their independence for the fulfillment of their economic needs as no single state in Central Asia is having any a full control on their economy. Through the Commonwealth of independent states, Russia is having a strong grip over these states economically and financially. Russia also does not want to lose the relationship and economic hold on these states. Moreover the Indian motives in CARs cannot be overlooked. The India interest in the Central Asian states has been more old than Pakistan since the Soviet period when the good relationship with Soviet Union also gave an edge to India over Pakistan there. Like Afghanistan, India has been assisting the CARs both morally and financially and wants to curtail any role of Pakistan in these Muslim states. In the face of these realities, Pakistan's role in Central Asia is greatly threatened. To be an active player in CARs, Pakistan must evolve a strategy to fulfill her goals, otherwise these hurdles are prone to damage the future interests of Pakistan there.

4.4. Lack of infrastructure facilities

Lack of infrastructure development between Pakistan and CARs is another bottleneck in improving the economic base of relationship. There is greater opportunity in developing the rail and road links. Particularly the railway tracks can be extended from Pakistan to Central Asia through Iran like the Chaman railway station can be connected with Turkmenistan through railway tracks and this project would have the assistance from some of the big powers as well, as Russia has already shown her interest in supporting the railway projects with CARs. There is a greater opportunity for both Pakistan and Central Asia to connect via the railway system. Moreover a railway track through Afghanistan can also be greatly helpful in improving the cooperation in case if the situation in Afghanistan gets peaceful.^{xviii} That would make transport and trade very easy also but need time and good strategy that would work in the long run. Lack of such infrastructure has already curtailed any possibility of interaction in any field between Pakistan and CARs.

5. What should be the policy options for Pakistan?

In the face of many hurdles that Pakistan can face in developing her relations with Central Asia, Pakistan is in a dire need to formulate a strategy with visionary approach. Central Asia is a rising region economically and all the regional and intraregional players are taking keen interest in this region because after Middle East the only source of future economic and energy wealth is Central Asia. Central Asia is not only the rising energy rich region even more than the Middle East but also agriculturally the land of CARs is one of the best for irrigation and productivity.^{xix} Since the independence of these Republics, the geo strategic politics has altogether changed and for Pakistan too there are many challenges. Gone are the days when military strength and expansionism were the sole aims of rising powers. Now the rising powers are recognized by the economic power they possess and that is the reason that Central Asia has become center of concern for the global players to gain economic strength. Therefore before making any strategy for maintaining a strong base of relationship, there are many realities which need to be kept in mind.

These realities show that there are many factors which still hamper any open interaction between Pakistan and Central Asia naturally because the political and economic conditions in CARs already keep them attached with their own system because no doubt CARs are now independent but still they are linked with the old borders along Russia and the Russian political and economic control still has an enormous impact on CARs^{xx}. The role of Communism in Soviet Union and their armies, bureaucracy and intelligence is still playing an active role in CARs. It must not be ignored that Central Asia is having a high level of literacy and is an agriculturally strong region with industrial potentials. What this region wants is not anything except a strong and advanced technology and they are not dependent for the aid and support of the developing countries. So any help from the countries of the South would not change their economy much than those western powers which can provide technical assistance in developing the strong economic base there^{xxi}. As far as the political system is concerned, Central Asian states are not very much prone to Islamic system like Pakistan or Saudi Arabia but they are interested in secularism and follow the Turkish model for themselves. Pakistan must be careful of playing the card of Islam in Central Asia. These are very important factors which can influence the nature of relationship between the CARs and Pakistan. Only history and culture cannot be relied upon for the enhancement of cooperation between the two at present and in future but the dynamics of the modern geo-political world and new strategic policies must be kept in mind while formulating a strategy to follow the economic aims regionally.

Pakistan must play the game strategically after understanding the various real issues involved in this regional economic battle. Only then Pakistan would be able to secure the future energy and economic gains which is becoming a greater wealth of its time. First of all political stability is very important for Pakistan. Without that no policies and future course of action can be successful. Pakistan can play her cards well for extending cooperation to Central Asia and getting regional economic strength only when there is no disorder of any kind within the state^{xxii}. Any internal instable situation would damage the interests of Pakistan outside. So it is the need of the hour that in the face of changed strategic international and regional policies, Pakistan should work with vision and sound approach towards the real issues and through democratic means must keep her own matters in order. Unless strong and stable political system is not there, any change for the better cannot be expected in the near future with regard to policies and interests because any political uncertainty would not allow for making long term strategies. Furthermore redefinition of the economic role of Pakistan along with rebuilding of the institutions is the priority area internally which must be considered upon. Another most important thing which is needed to be taken into consideration is the way we should deal with the Iranian and Turkish involvement in Central Asia.

Both these countries are Muslim states and Pakistan enjoys good relations with both of them. Their involvement in CARs must not be taken in any hostile sense rather a healthy way of competition is what Pakistan must adopt to deal with the matters. Already surrounded by Afghan problem and Indian factor, Pakistan is in no position to create other battle field for herself so all the issues must be decided with visionary approach and sound policies.

As mentioned earlier that Russian influence and control is still there over CARs and it is quite complicated for any other state to get hold of the economy there and specifically for Pakistan with all the other challenges, this sounds more difficult. So Russian factor cannot be ignored and mutual beneficial relationship between Pakistan and Central Asia cannot go ahead without taking into account the susceptibilities of Russia. One of the most important and priority matter of concern is the bad situation in Afghanistan. Once the Afghanistan crisis is dealt with properly, there would be greater opportunity for Pakistan to have an easy access to CARs. Every possible effort must be made by Pakistan to bring the disputed parties in Afghanistan to reconcile and to bring political stability and order because that is greatly in the interest of Pakistan.^{xxiii} Infact Afghanistan's crisis is the biggest hurdle in the way of Pakistan political, cultural and socio-economic interaction with Central Asia.

That poses a great threat to all the projects which have been decided to be implemented and those which are in the pipeline. Pakistan is trying her best to bring stability in Afghanistan and for this purpose, Pakistan must be active to the changes which take place from time to time regionally and internationally^{xxiv}. Improvement of infrastructure is very much important for Pakistan to give an access to CARs to the sea area through Pakistan. Lack of infrastructure on Pakistan's side is also one of the biggest hurdles in the way of increasing trade and economic relations. Once efforts are made to improve the facilities to boost the economic ties, a road to streamline the relations can be built. That would greatly help CARs because those states are landlocked and an access to the sea would increase their economic activities as well. In such a case both Pakistan and CARs would take the benefits. In this regard ECO can play a very positive role for developing regional economic zone with strong potential^{xxv}. Last but not the least is that the people in both the countries must come closer by educational and cultural links. The arts and literature and cultural visits can be arranged by Pakistan for the people of CARs and similarly the other side can arrange students and professional people visits from Pakistan. In this way the new generation can get to know the historical relations and economic potentials of each other's countries. These efforts would ultimately revive the importance of each other's countries and people to people contacts would be enhanced with positive impacts on the behavior and policies of the governments.

6. Conclusion

Not only these steps would be significant to be taken care of but an active approach and sound understanding of the rising issues regionally is the need of the time. Losing a better economic opportunity would be the greater mistake of the century with long term negative impacts on Pakistan. In the era where international and regional strategic scenario is changing with every second, an active stance and diplomatic balance is the need of the day. No doubt the cooperation in the last few years between Pakistan and Central Asian states has been increased but it is the time to counter the challenges which are posing an obvious threat. Of almost all the countries involved in Central Asia, Pakistan's position is comparatively stronger and can be more stable economically in view of the fact that South Asia and Central Asia shared same cultural and historical relations. The importance of Central Asia with regard to its enormous potential and the future greater possibility of cooperation in various fields make CARs an important aspect of Pakistan's foreign policy. Moreover geographical location of CARs also give that region a significant place in Pakistan's strategic motives. In case the critical importance of all the factors in not considered in time, every important economic cooperation would bypass Pakistan because there are many other alternatives which are available to CARs in respect of economic and trade opportunities. No doubt it would be impossible for Pakistan to create an influence in Central Asia overnight because there are many obstacles but still efforts are being done and high level visits have taken place considering the potential nature of relationship.

Notes

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