

Trans-Regional Connectivity Plans in Eurasia's Heartland and the Role of CPEC/Gwadar

Shabir Ahmad Khan¹, Tabinda Rani

1. Professor, Area Study Center, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, KPK, Pakistan

2. Lecturer, Department of Law, Hazara University, Mansehra, KPK, Pakistan

Corresponding email: shabirasc15@uop.edu.pk

Abstract

Connectivity has been the driving force behind the transformational changes taking place in Eurasia's heartland i.e. Central Asia. Global and regional powers including China, Russia and European Union have initiated their own connectivity plans to link Central Asia for its resource base as well as to use the region as a transit hub due to its geography. The regional organizations such as Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) have also initiated plans to develop complementary trade and transportation corridors to link Central, South and West Asia. Consequently, an integrated system of east-west trans-continental trade and logistic corridors are being developed linking China, Central Asia, Europe and West Asia. Still an important link i.e. to connect these east-west trans-continental trade and logistic corridors with trans-oceanic corridors in the north-south direction via Afghanistan and Pakistan to South Asia and Indian Ocean is underdeveloped. Converged interests of major regional powers in a changed regional context present an opportunity to develop this link in southern direction. Central Asian Republics are also looking keen to revive this historical outlet and open up in the southern direction in an altered regional geo-economic and geo-political configuration. The southern link complements the connectivity plans of CARs, major powers and regional organizations in developing trans-regional connectivity in the heartland. Pakistan also seems enthusiastic to develop Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia trade and logistic corridor to supplement CPEC and to give greater impetus to trans-regional connectivity by linking trans-continental corridors with trans-oceanic corridors through Gwadar efficiently. The approach in study has been explanatory and exploratory employing qualitative methodology.

Keywords: *Connectivity; China; Russia; Central Asia; European Union; CPEC; Gwadar*

Introduction

Connectivity refers to the development of effective and efficient cross border network (inter and intra-regionally) to facilitate smooth flow of goods, services, capital, people and knowledge in the context of this research paper. The development of cross border physical connectivity infrastructure (highways, railways, pipelines, cables etc) necessitate the development of its soft component i.e. harmonization and coordination of cross border legal regimes (custom laws, regulations, tariff, transit fee etc). Connectivity has been termed as the arms race of twenty first century for access to most markets (Khanna, 2024). Global and regional powers are intensely engaged in the resource rich, geographically important and economically dynamic region of Central Asia i.e. Eurasia's heartland to develop trans-regional trade and logistic corridors for access to markets. The problematic side of the game is denial of access to rivals and adversaries. All the major powers including United States of America (USA), Russia, China and European Union (EU) have developed their own trans-regional connectivity plans to link as well as to utilize the region of Central Asia as a transit route to various markets. USA's New Silk Road, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP), China's Belt and Road (BRI) and EU's Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasia-Asia (TRACECA) which has taken the shape of trans-Caspian Middle Corridor are significant in this regard.

Consequently, an integrated system of east-west inter-continental transport and logistics corridors is being developed in Eurasia's heartland. This research paper argues that linking these east-west trans-continental corridors with trans-oceanic corridors in north-south direction via Pakistan's Gwadar port will give greater impetus to trans-regional connectivity. This paper attempts to examine and analyze the connectivity plans of China, Russia, European Union, ECO and CAREC vis-a-vis Central Asia and the role of CPEC and Gwadar in a transformed regional configuration. Main research questions include: what are the important hallmarks of an altered regional configuration? how the CARs, China, Russia, European Union and regional organizations framing their connectivity plans in Central Asia and how CPEC/Gwadar helps in giving greater impetus to trans-regional connectivity in Eurasia's heartland? The approach is explanatory as well as exploratory employing qualitative methodology, content analysis and double hermeneutics method to re-interpret the available literature on the concept of trans-regional connectivity in an altered Central Asian regional geo-political and geo-economic landscape.

The global and regional geo-political and geo-economic contexts have undergone significant transformation after the US/NATO withdrawal, end of war in Afghanistan, China's economic rise and largest external donor in Central Asia, Central Asia's consolidated nation and statehood, Saudi-Iran detente and Russia-Ukraine war. With US/NATO military withdrawal from the region, the 'layover phenomenon' in regional context has come to an end and the role

of regional countries has gained more space to address the regional issues of security, connectivity and development from a regional perspective. China has initiated concrete plans backed by finances to develop cross border connectivity infrastructure in the region. Russia in post Ukraine war and in the face of Western sanctions looking towards east/Asia for economic partners and markets while EU focuses on the Middle Corridor (discussed later) to bypass Russia in access to Central Asia and China. CARs are looking beyond their borders to develop connectivity in multiple directions to market their resources and utilize their geographical location in contrast to the decades of 1990s and 2000s when CARs were preoccupied by nation and state making process. Pakistan under the policy "Vision Central Asia" envisages Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia energy, trade and transport corridor in an altered regional geo-political and geo-economic configuration to supplement CPEC and offer access to ocean to the landlocked region (Khan, 2023). The land locked Eurasia's heartland has been rapidly connected by developing east-west trans-continental trade and logistic corridors from China to Europe and West Asia via Central Asia particularly under the China's Silk Road Economic Belt initiative. Europe has focused on the trans-Caspian Middle Corridor linking Caucasus and Central Asia up to China bypassing Russia in post Ukraine war period. Russia plans to access South Asia and 'Great Ocean' via Central Asia in the altered regional geo-political context, in the face of war with Ukraine while USA has left the region militarily (Kulintsev, 2023). Gwadar offers to efficiently link east-west trans-continental Eurasian trade corridors to trans-oceanic corridor. This linkage will give greater impetus to northern, central and southern Eurasian corridors. A north-south Russia-Central Asia-South Asia-Indian Ocean transport corridor can be developed through the existing Asian Highway 7 starting from Yekaterinburg (Russia) reaches to Gwadar via Astana, Tashkent, Kabul, Peshawar as well as via Kandahar. This will be an overland North-South trade, energy and logistic corridor in contrast to the multi-modal International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) from Russia, via Caspian, Iran and Arabian Sea to India. The energy cables, pipelines, Khyber-Pass Economic Corridor, highways and the trans-Afghan railway line from Termiz (Uzbekistan) to Pakistan supported by all Central Asian Republics (CARs), Russia and China can be decisive in creating north-south transport corridor between Russia, Central Asia and South Asia making Gwadar a true hub of trans-regional connectivity.

Pakistan as a multi-regional country geographically at the juncture of Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia has assumed added significance in terms of facilitating regional and trans-regional connectivity. The World Bank stated that after the completion of cross border infrastructure, Pakistan could emerge as a hub of economic activity regionally and trans-regionally (World Bank Group, 2019). Pakistan at the same time is under constant pressure while navigating great powers' competition and balancing interests of major powers in terms of facilitating regional integration. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of

BRI, having role in Silk Road Economic Belt through Kashgar and in Maritime Road through Gwadar can be instrumental in facilitating trans-regional connectivity. Gwadar Sea Port, located in Baluchistan Province of Pakistan is the world's third largest deep seaport (Aslam et al., 2024) which can be termed as the jewel in CPEC will greatly facilitate trans-regional connectivity. A deep seaport plays an important role in global trade in determining the scale and efficiency of shipping operations by accommodating larger vessels, improving logistics chain for goods and reducing costs. Gwadar since long has been touted as a hub of regional connectivity. Pakistan has been developing connectivity infrastructure nationally to connect Gwadar through highways, motorways, railways and pipelines with the rest of the country to efficiently serve as hub of trans-regional connectivity.

Besides the Chinese finances for transport infrastructure under CPEC, extra-regional relationships have also provided funds for the development of roads including USA, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Asian Development Bank and World Bank (Malik, 2024). From Sust-Tashkurgan in north, Kashgar is linked to Gwadar by eastern, central and western alignments of CPEC. Kabul is linked to Gwadar via Torkham (Pak-Afghan border) and Peshawar by Motorway, Grant Trunk (GT) Road and Indus highway inter linking the three alignments of CPEC. Northern and southern bypasses (bypassing Peshawar city) link Indus highway, Motorways and Grand Trunk Road to Torkham are under construction. The World Bank financed Khyber Pass Economic Corridor (\$460 million) linking Peshawar to Torkham via four lane highway accompanied by Special Economic Zones is also under progress (Khan, 2023). Gwadar is also linked to Kabul via Chaman and Kandahar.

Central Asian Republics (CARs) and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)/Gwadar

CARs desire to develop multiple and multi-dimensional trade, energy and transport corridors to maximally benefit from the region's resource base and geographical location. Pakistan via Afghanistan offers the shortest outlet to CARs to South Asia and to the Sea Lanes of Communications (SLCs) in a changed regional geo-political and geo-economic configuration. Russia and CARs seem mostly interested in huge Indian market however any overland connectivity for Russia and CARs towards Indian market has to pass through Pakistan. CARs since 1992 have been looking for the revival of this historical and economic outlet in southern direction via Afghanistan and Pakistan to South Asia, Indian Ocean and beyond. An altered regional geo-political configuration provides yet another opportunity to realize this dream. The two giant neighbors of Central Asia i.e. Russia and China seem interested in developing this outlet in southern direction for their own benefits in the face of US/NATO withdrawal and Russia-Ukraine war. This outlet also efficiently addresses the geographic constrain for Central Asia.

CARs view Afghanistan as an integral part of this region without which trade becomes extremely difficult for CARs (Taieb et al., n.d.). CARs have renewed interest in Afghanistan and seek some

kind of accommodation with the Taliban to advance the cause of trans-Afghan transport to overcome their geography-induced challenge (Starr, 2022). According to the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Islamabad, Uzbekistan has significantly increased the volume of transit cargo to Pakistan via Afghanistan recently which reached to 1 million ton in 2023.

Pakistan has already signed transit trade agreements with Uzbekistan bilaterally and with China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan under the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Trade agreement. Pakistan has framed 'Vision Central Asia Policy' and envisages "Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia Corridor with a vast network of highways, railways and pipelines to complement CPEC. Besides energy pipelines, highways, railways and electricity transportation projects, an important component of this corridor has been the World Bank's sponsored Khyber-Pass Economic Corridor worth \$402 million to develop four lanes highway linking Peshawar to Torkham (Pak-Afghan border) which also complements Corridors 5 and 6 of CAREC (Khan, 2022). Development of multiple and multi-dimensional trade, energy and logistic corridors to various regional and global destinations lies at the heart of the connectivity plans of major powers as well as of CARs (Lee & Yelena, 2021). To carry hydrocarbons and other goods to growing South Asian market, Indian Ocean and beyond in cost-effective southern direction makes a great deal of commercial sense for CARs (Lee & Yelena, 2021).

Economic Cooperation Organization's (ECO's) Roads, Railways and CPEC/Gwadar

The member states of ECO and CAREC including Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan and all CARs realize that regional connectivity is the only way to capitalize on region's comparative advantage in terms of natural resources in order to address the issues of socio-economic under-development. ECO countries have reasonable achievements in the context of cross border physical connectivity infrastructure development. All the ECO rail and road corridors are interlinked leading to the ports of Gwadar and Karachi. ECO Road Route 1A starts with in Turkey along with its borders with Bulgaria and Greece in the West traverses in the Northern parts of Turkey reaches to Iranian border near Agri, continues in south-eastern direction enters Pakistan reaches Quetta and Gwadar (Khan, 2022). The ECO Road 1B starts from Turkey via Iran and Afghanistan, reaches to Tajikistan and further up to China's boarder. It can be extended to Almaty, Kazakhstan up to the borders of China. This route has also branches to the ports of Pakistan via Herat and Kandahar (Afghanistan). The ECO Road Route 2 similarly starts from Bulgaria and Greece via Tehran, Ashgabat, Tashkent, Bishkek and Almaty reaches to Chinese border (Khan 2022).

The ECO Road Route 3 starts from Azerbaijan's border with Russian Federation via Baku reaches Tehran up to Bandar Abbas. Its branches also go to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Likewise the ECO Network Road Route 4,5,6,7 according to ECO Road Network Development plan document, connect all ECO members from Kazakh borders with Russia linking all other

Central Asian Republics up to Karachi and Gwadar ports of Pakistan (Khan, 2022). ECO container train between Islamabad, Tehran and Istanbul became operational in August 2010 with a total length of 6543 km (Saffari, 2018). The Rail Route 1 starts from Turkey and reaches up to Wagha, Pakistan's border with India across Pakistan. The ECO Rail route 2A traverses through Turkey, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan up to China's border (Khan 2022). Intra-ECO integration is one of three core principles of ECO vision 2025 as per the declaration of ECO Summit 2017 in Islamabad and ECO vision 2025 Implementation framework document (ECO, 2017). For sustainable energy security, enhanced trade and higher living standards, ECO transport corridors need to be operationalized as planned in ECO Vision 2025. It is evident that all these ECO corridors are linked to Gwadar intra-regionally.

Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation's (CAREC) Corridors and CPEC/Gwadar

Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program was founded in 1997 having eleven member states including Pakistan, Afghanistan, five CARs, Mongolia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and China. CAREC, concentrating on economic stability, connectivity infrastructure and development of economic corridors, has invested \$51 billion till December 2023 in transport, trade and energy projects (CAREC, n.d.). The Development partners for CAREC include Asian Development Bank, World Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Japan International Cooperation Agency, the United Nations Development Program, European Investment Bank and International Road Transport Union (IRU). (CAREC, May 2017). Asian Development Bank supports Pakistan under the CAREC strategy for regional connectivity in transport and energy sectors including CAREC corridors' extension to Gwadar and Karachi ports (Javaid & Uzma, 2022). Regional Improvement of Border Services (RIBS) program is being implemented under the CAREC plan in four countries including Pakistan to facilitate smooth border crossings. The six CAREC corridors are not only interlinked with each other, these corridors are also connected to the east west Eurasian trans-continental corridors from China to Europe and West Asia across Central Asia. CAREC corridors 2, 3, 5 and 6 all involve Afghanistan and the border crossings with CARs i.e. Hairatan, Sher Khan Bandar, Torghondi, Spin Buldak and Torkham present greater opportunities to link Gwadar and Karachi ports to trans-continental trade and logistic corridors. Gwadar can also be linked to Afghanistan and CARs via four railway tracks i. Chaman-Spin Buldak, ii. Lashkargah-Gwadar, iii. Khost-Miransha, iv. Jalalabad-Peshawar (CAREC, n.d.). Afghanistan as a regional corner stone has crucial role in advancing regional connectivity. Afghanistan's inclusion in CPEC will be beneficial for greater regional connectivity. Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway line will be instrumental by linking CARs with Gwadar and Karachi. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project makes portion of railway line via Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey to Europe and is part of China's broader regional strategy, including BRI, to enhance regional and trans-regional connectivity

(Donnellon-May, 2023). This railway line will be connected to the proposed Trans-Afghan railway line from Termiz (Uzbekistan) via Afghanistan to Pakistan.

China's Strategies for Trans-Regional Connectivity and CPEC/Gwadar

China's 'Go West' policy aimed to address the economic disparity in Xinjiang for stability and smooth energy imports from Central Asia plus enhanced trade and economic relations. CPEC has been part of this policy in order to provide an outlet to the landlocked western province of China to Indian Ocean. China announced its global and regional connectivity project Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and CPEC in 2014 respectively. The Belt provides overland connectivity for China via Central Asia to European and African continents while Road links China to global markets via Sea Lanes of Communication. After consolidating its position in Central Asia's energy market in the form of oil and gas pipelines from the region to China, China has been developing trans-continental rail and road corridors via Central Asia to European and West Asian markets in east-west direction in the form of northern, central and southern Eurasian corridors. A railway line opened up in 2014 from China to Iran via Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The New Eurasian land bridge connects China via Kazakhstan and Russia to Europe, the Middle Corridor links China to Caucasasia, Turkey and Europe through Caspian while the southern corridor connects China to Europe via Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey. These east-west transcontinental trade and logistic corridors can be efficiently linked to trans-oceanic corridors via Afghanistan to Pakistan's Gwadar sea port. On June 06, 2024, China, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan signed agreement to develop railway line from Kashgar (China) to Andijan (Uzbekistan) via Kyrgyzstan (Varga, 2024). This railway line will be part of Middle as well as Southern Eurasian corridors to link China with European and West Asian markets. Similarly this line will also be linked to the proposed trans-Afghan railway from Uzbekistan via Afghanistan to Pakistan leading to Gwadar port through Main Line 1 (ML1). China has shown interest in developing the trans-Afghan railway line while upgrading ML1 has been part of CPEC phase II. China also plans to develop China-Tajikistan-Afghanistan corridor which will ultimately be linked to CPEC. China has already shown its interest to include Afghanistan in CPEC. CPEC once fully developed will also end the Malacca dilemma for China while circumventing the volatile and vulnerable sea route via South China Sea and Indian Ocean in access to energy rich Middle East from where China imports bulk of its energy. The distance between Western China and the Middle East would be reduced by over 80%, cost of transportation would be lowered by over 75%, and travel time would reduce by over 85% (IPRI< 2017).

Russia's Pivot to Asia and CPEC/Gwadar

Russia announced its pivot to Asia in 2012 with the aim to develop its far east and conclude economic partnerships with countries in economically growing Asia (Kapoor, 2022).

However the Russia-Ukraine war and Western sanctions have expedited this Asia-east-ward march for Russia. Russia has replaced its Greater European Program with Greater Eurasian Partnership in search of strategic and economic partners and markets. Eurasia's heartland and China have assumed added significance in this regard. Russia-Ukraine war and Western sanctions naturally compel Russia to open up via Central Asia to South Asia, Arabian Sea and beyond via Pakistan. Russia had old plans to open up in Southern direction via Pakistan to 'Great Ocean' since long (Stobdan, 2015). In this context the Soviet era transportation infrastructure and China's connectivity infrastructure in Central Asia plus CPEC in Pakistan will be equally beneficial to Russia, China, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Russia's economic integration plans for Central Asia involving bilateral as well multilateral cooperation instruments such as Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in particular has the potential to realize Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership. EAEU has been termed as an important policy tool in achieving Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) where Pakistan and India were invited to join it in 2015 (Morozov & Korybko, 2020). According to Vladimir Morozov, Associate Professor at MGIMO and Andrew Korybko, independent analyst; "On a grander scale, Pakistan could be the trans-regional gateway state for the EAEU's further bloc-to-bloc integration with not only SAARC, but also the SCO and even the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) considering that the Gulf countries are investing in CPEC too and could take advantage of its terminal port of Gwadar for conducting trade back and forth with Central Asia" (Fazl-e-Haider, 2022).

Syed Fazle Haidar opined that Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership passes through CPEC as he argues that Russia's agreement with Afghan Taliban for exporting discounted oil and wheat, to provide oil to Pakistan on deferred payments in Chinese currency and plan of extending its gas pipeline infrastructure in Central Asia to Pakistan are signs of Russia's preparation to join CPEC (Fazl-e-Haider, 2022). Pakistan's geography historically served as a gateway to Eurasia's heartland. This is increasingly becoming a reality in contemporary era due to the Sino-Russian interests and integration plans in Central Asia (Khan, 2021). China has shown interests in developing Trans-Afghan-Pakistan railway from Termiz, Uzbekistan via Afghanistan to Pakistan linking Main Line Railway (ML 1) that is also to be revived under CPEC. Main Line (ML 1) links Peshawar with Karachi and Gwadar across Pakistan. Indeed a North-South corridor from Central Russia – Yekaterinburg- via Astana-Tashkent-Kabul-Peshawar plus Qandahar, Quetta Gwadar to Indian Ocean via Asian Highway 7 can be developed. Russia is looking towards this opening in the face of Western sanctions while China's Belt will have a natural boom in realizing regional connectivity. Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership announced in 2016 has been re-enforced and vitalized by Russia-Ukraine war in effect reorienting Russia's foreign policy focus from Greater Europe to Greater Eurasia and ultimately 'Towards Great Ocean' (Khizar & Ijaz, 2021).

European Union's Connectivity Plans for Heartland and Gwadar

European Union (EU) is an important economic player in Central Asia where its investment reached to \$ 64.5 billion in 2021 (Tshkay, 2021). EU revived the idea of Silk Road as early as 1993 by announcing its Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasia-Asia (TRACECA) (Turkstra, 2018). TRACECA has taken the shape of Middle Corridor. The Middle Corridor is also known as Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) linking Europe, Caucasias, Central Asia and China. Proposed trans-Caspian oil and gas pipelines from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan respectively across Caspian to Baku (Azerbaijan) are important components of this trade and logistic corridor linking China, Central Asia and Caucasias to Europe. In the face of Russia-Ukraine war, the multi-modal Middle Corridor has become more important for Europe in access to Central Asia and China. There is a 33% increase in freight from China to Europe via the Middle Corridor to bypass the Northern Eurasian Corridor via Russia (IISS, 2023). EU has pledged to provide Euro 10 billion to expedite the development of the Middle Corridor (European Commission, January 2024). The Middle Corridor already inter-linked to trans-Afghan transportation network via ECO and CAREC corridors can have shortest access to Sea Lanes of Communication via Gwadar. This will give an essential opening to the land locked heartland. Opening up of Central Asia in the southern direction via trans-Afghan-Pakistan corridor will give an impetus to the Eurasian corridors by efficiently connecting east-west trans-continental trade corridors with the trans-oceanic corridors in a north-south direction. CARs' thirst and urge for trade and transit with South Asia and beyond provides context for cooperation with Afghanistan and Pakistan. This link between the trans-continental corridors and trans-oceanic corridors is in the interest of CARs and of all powers engaged in the region leading to a win win situation.

Conclusion

Eurasian heartland i.e. Central Asia is continuously under world focus since the breakup of former Soviet Union. The region's resource base and geographical location are the appealing factors inviting major powers' attention. The regional and extra-regional powers are engaged in the region to have access to the oil and gas for own consumption as well as to use the region as transit link to other markets. The technological developments such as high speed railways, highways, pipelines, Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) etc add to region's importance as an efficient trans-continental trade and logistic route. A number of east-west trans-continental trade and logistic corridor being developed as a result of regional and trans-regional integration processes under taken by individual countries and regional organizations. However the issue for CARs has been the lack of efficient access to Sea Lanes of Communications (SLCs) through which most of the global trade takes place. These east-west trans-continental corridors meet the requirement

of countries involved in their development however linking these trans-continental corridors with trans-oceanic corridors in the southerly direction via Afghanistan and Pakistan will give greater impetus to trans-regional connectivity. CARs after consolidating their nation and statehood are looking beyond their borders to develop multiple trade routes in multiple directions for access to various markets to sell their exportable surpluses of hydrocarbons, agrarian products, minerals, metals and other commodities. CARs have renewed interests in the stability of Afghanistan in the changed regional circumstances to revive the historical linkages and open up in the southern direction for access to huge South Asian market and to the Indian Ocean as per the 21st century requirement.

Pakistan's economic backwardness largely owes to the lack of its connectivity within the region despite having significant geographical location. Central Asia offers oil and gas, electricity, cotton and grain to Pakistan in contrast to South Asia while Pakistan provides Central Asia the essential outlet to SLCs plus over land access to South Asian market. Pakistan always sustained hope that one day it will become a gateway to Eurasia's heartland. In fact Pakistan links the entire Eurasian super continent by linking its Heartland, Islands (West Asia) and Rimland. Changed regional circumstances present an opportunity to CARs and Pakistan to prioritize the geo-economics over geo-politics for enhanced connectivity. Central Asia is undergoing significant transformation in terms of connectivity plans initiated by individual countries and regional organizations. In fact CPEC derives its meaning from linking Central Asia to South Asia and Indian Ocean. The huge network of Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia trade and logistic corridor comprising railways, highways, pipelines and energy cables complements CPEC comprehensively. One can observe that Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity is aligned with the integration processes of China, Russia and EU in the changed regional circumstances. CARs connectivity to CPEC and Gwadar equally benefits Russia, China and EU by promoting and advancing their connectivity plans for the region. Gwadar's strategic postures holds greater significance as it corresponds with the evolving dynamics of regional geo-economic configuration. The Asian Development Bank study considered Gwadar as an efficient alternative to the Persian Gulf ports (Sattar, et al., 2023). Pakistan needs to de-couple economic connectivity from politics as nothing compromises security more than a weak economy does. Pakistan should welcome any development to be a link between Central and South Asia. The changed regional circumstances offer an opportunity to realize Pakistan's strategic goal to be a transit hub for trans-regional connectivity.

Pakistan needs to develop nationally and regionally integrated multi modal transport infrastructure including ports, highways and railways network to link Gwadar with Iran, Afghanistan, CARs, India and China to accommodate regional flow of goods, services and capital. It is imperative for Pakistan to engage meaningfully Afghanistan, CARs, Iran and China in the

CPEC-centric connectivity. Harmonization and coordination of cross border legal regime such as custom clearance and transit agreements between Pakistan and the regional countries for smooth border crossings is equally essential. These regional and trans-regional linkages would address the challenge of navigating regional geopolitics for Pakistan.

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