

FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES OF PAKISTAN IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract: *Pakistan's policy towards Central Asia is analyzed in this article. The author examines the history of relations, their evolution. Differences in Pakistan's approaches to Central Asia in the initial period and at the present time are explored in the work. The author analyzes the prerequisites for cooperation, coinciding and diverging interests, which remain relevant at the present time. The place of the SCO in the foreign policy of Pakistan is also considered in the article. Particular attention is paid to transport, communication and energy projects linking Pakistan and Central Asia.*

Keywords: *Pakistan, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, transport corridor, SCO, energy cooperation, CASA-1000, TAPI, cooperation.*

Introduction

Pakistan's relations with the countries of Central Asia are based on historical ties and a common cultural heritage. Pakistan's geopolitical location at the crossroads of South and Central Asia makes it central to the interconnectedness of the two regions. Pakistan and Afghanistan are the same "connecting" link in interregional cooperation, but Pakistan has a disproportionately greater political and economic "weight" and the potential for cooperation.

The current stage of relations begins with the first years of independence of the states of Central Asia. Pakistan plays a crucial role in the development of the situation in Afghanistan, relations with the Taliban movement, and with the Pakistani Taliban "Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan" threatening Islamabad, which actualizes the common security problems with the countries of Central Asia. Pakistan has a fairly developed and modernized transport and communications system. This creates the basis for presenting Pakistan as an interregional logistics "hub", which is of interest to the countries of Central Asia as the shortest access to the World Ocean and a trade and economic partner.

Evolution of Pakistan's Policy towards Central Asia

The end of the Cold War opened Central Asia to Pakistan, discovering its advantageous geostrategic position, significant natural resources, and market potential. Pakistan considered the belonging of the independent states of Central

Asia to the Islamic world an exceptionally important advantage, counting on establishing special relations.

The geographic proximity of Pakistan and the transit potential of Central Asia, in many respects similar threats to regional security emanating from Afghanistan, looked attractive. However, the prolonged Afghan conflict prevented the establishment of a direct land connection, and for Pakistan, the "breakthrough" into Central Asia directly depended on the ability to open secure trans-Afghan communications through the support of pro-Pakistani movements that could bring peace to the country.

Pakistan's persistent attempts to resolve the issue of access to Central Asia through Afghanistan were characterized by its policy in the first half of the 1990s. This period conditionally begins with the visit of the President of Uzbekistan I.A. Karimov in Islamabad in 1992 and ends with the visit of the Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan B. Bhutto in 1995, which took place in the context of the aggravation of the conflict in Afghanistan and the gradual strengthening of the Taliban movement that emerged with the support of Pakistan¹. This visit completed the first stage of Pakistan's Central Asian policy, which was marked by increased political activity in Islamabad.

The growing differences between Pakistan and the countries of Central Asia regarding the ways of resolving the conflict in Afghanistan, the distrust of the leadership of the secular republics of the Central Asian region regarding the intentions of Islamabad, including attempts to use the Islamic factor for political purposes, called into question the further development of relations. The civil war in Tajikistan, with the participation of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan as the main opposition force, caused concern in Central Asia. Pakistan acted as a key ally of the Afghan Taliban movement, while the countries of Central Asia supported the forces of the Northern Alliance opposing the Taliban.

A new stage in the development of relations between Pakistan and the countries of Central Asia began after the start of the international anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan in 2001. Pakistan and the countries of Central Asia became allies in the fight against international terrorism, providing support to international forces in Afghanistan. Cooperation has resumed across the entire range of interaction, including in the field of security, covering the fight against the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. In this context, the visit of the President of

¹ Pakistan's Bhutto visiting Uzbekistan. - <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1995/05/21/Pakistans-Bhutto-visiting-Uzbekistan/1698801028800/>

Pakistan P. Musharraf to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which took place in March 2005, outlined the long-term intentions of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to develop cooperation in the field of security and trade and economic interaction, can be noted².

The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan remained a major factor holding back cooperation opportunities between Pakistan and the countries of Central Asia. Security problems and lack of infrastructure left unrealized the potential of using the shortest route from Central Asia to the World Ocean, which Islamabad traditionally views as its main geo-economic advantage in relations with the countries of the region.

In addition, rivalry with India greatly influences Pakistan's policy towards Central Asia. The policy of "containment" of India in Afghanistan entails the direct dependence on the use of the potential of supplying energy resources, the construction of pipelines, and power lines, and the development of trans-Afghan roads and railways from ensuring Pakistani interests in Afghanistan.

The agreement on the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, concluded by the US and the Taliban in February 2020, followed by a change of power in Kabul, opened up new opportunities for Pakistan's policy in Central Asia. There have been some changes in Pakistan's Central Asian policy. Pakistan's policy has become more pragmatic, there has been a transition from ideas of the Islamic community as one of the most important factors of interaction to the practical implementation of the existing economic potential for cooperation. The pragmatism of Islamabad is also expressed in the refusal to perceive its geopolitical position as a factor that in itself makes Pakistan one of the significant forces in Central Asia. Characteristically, the actual use of Pakistan's strategic location as an international trade and transit hub remains unrealized. At the present stage, this task has become the most important in the Central Asian policy of Pakistan.

Energy cooperation of Pakistan with the countries of Central Asia

Energy is one of the promising areas of cooperation and a traditional area of interest for Pakistan. Pakistan, like all countries of South Asia, is in need of energy imports. The possibility of deliveries from Central Asia seemed to be one

² Galimov R. Interesy detskogo sada v Tsentral'noy Azii: dinamika sotrudnichestva. - <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/interesy-pakistana-v-regione-tsentralnoy-azii-dinamika-sotrudnichestva/>
Галимов Р. Интересы Пакистана в регионе Центральной Азии: динамика сотрудничества. - <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/interesy-pakistana-v-regione-tsentralnoy-azii-dinamika-sotrudnichestva>

of the priorities for the IRP from the beginning of establishing cooperation with the region's states.

All five Central Asian republics have energy export potential, either in oil and gas or electricity generation. However, the Afghan conflict left this potential unfulfilled. At the same time, the currently existing two large projects for the import of Central Asian gas and electricity can become a key factor in Central Asia's cooperation not only with Pakistan but also with India.

The first of these projects date back to the second half of the 1990s. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, which in recent years has received the unofficial name of the "peace pipeline", is supposed to connect the gas field in Turkmenistan with the Indian border town of Fazilki, also connecting the territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The last two countries will be able to receive part of the natural gas and transit fees through their territory. Connecting the still unstable Afghanistan and the warring India and Pakistan, the pipeline could serve as an example of cooperation and security, but its long history shows that there are significant obstacles to its implementation.

The TAPI gas pipeline project itself dates back to 1995 when Turkmenistan and Pakistan signed a corresponding memorandum on the start of its construction. Following this, the project received the consent of the Taliban that ruled Afghanistan. But its implementation was delayed, and in 1998 the company Unocal, which acted as the construction contractor, withdrew from this project due to security and human rights issues in Afghanistan, and the idea was "frozen". The first resuscitation of the project occurred in 2002 during negotiations between Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan with the Asian Development Bank, which could act as a key financial institution for the future gas pipeline³.

In 2008, India joined this US-backed project. In 2015, the construction of the Turkmen part of the pipeline to the Afghan border began, and this was the first step in the practical implementation of the TAPI project. In 2018, the start of construction of the Afghan-Pakistani section of the gas pipeline was announced⁴.

The change of power in Afghanistan significantly corrected the situation. First of all, it should be noted the actual end of the internal conflict in Afghanistan, and peace was established in the country. However, the lack of international

³ ADB, Historic Agreement Brings Long Awaited TAPI Pipeline Closer to Reality, May 23, 2012; <http://www.adb.org/news/historic-agreements-bring-long-awaited-tapi-pipeline-closer-reality>

⁴ See: Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline Project. Hydrocarbons technology, 2022 - <https://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/projects/turkmenistan-afghanistan-pakistan-india-tapi-gas-pipeline-project/>

recognition of the new government and the uncertainty about its domestic and foreign policy left open several questions, including regarding the implementation of TAPI.

Meanwhile, the participating countries are still interested in the implementation of the TAPI project. In particular, we can note the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan R. Meredov to Afghanistan, during which the prospects for the construction of TAPI, as well as a power line from Turkmenistan to Pakistan, a railway from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, issues of cross-border cooperation and security were discussed⁵. India is actively expressing interest in TAPI. This aspiration was voiced during the Central Asia + India meeting in January 2022, as well as during the visit of the President of India to Turkmenistan a little later⁶. Pakistan is also extremely positive about the prospects for TAPI⁷.

However, the construction is still not completed and the project seems to be still far from being realized. TAPI is a rather expensive enterprise: the approximate cost of construction is estimated at 10 billion US dollars⁸. Participating countries count on the assistance of international financial institutions⁹ or private investors¹⁰. However, it seems that this assistance requires, first of all, international recognition of the Afghan government, as well as security guarantees.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan after the withdrawal of foreign forces found itself outside the international agenda, and the loss of attention indicates a loss of interest in what is happening in this country. Thus, the problems of Afghanistan, the recognition of its government, for the international community have ceased to be among the most pressing international issues. This situation largely repeats the beginning of the 1990s, and the "information vacuum" about Afghanistan presents the participating countries themselves to try to resolve TAPI issues. In addition,

⁵ Vizit pravitel'stvennoy delegatsii Turkmenistana v Afganistan. Ofitsial'nyy sayt MID Turkmenistana - <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/2866> / Визит правительственной делегации Туркменистана в Афганистан.

Официальный сайт МИД Туркменистана - <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/2866>

⁶ Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi. India's Plan to Realize TAPI. April 12, 2022. -

<https://business.com.tm/post/8928/pakistan-turkmenistan-mull-timely-completion-of-tapi-gas-pipeline-project>

⁷ Pakistan, Turkmenistan Mull Timely Completion of TAPI Gas Pipeline Project. -

<https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/indias-plan-to-realize-tapi/>

⁸ Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi. India's Plan to Realize TAPI. April 12, 2022. -

<https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/indias-plan-to-realize-tapi/>

⁹ See: Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline Project. Hydrocarbons technology, 2022 -

<https://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/projects/turkmenistan-afghanistan-pakistan-india-tapi-gas-pipeline-project/>

¹⁰ Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi. India's Plan to Realize TAPI. April 12, 2022. -

<https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/indias-plan-to-realize-tapi/>

the management of the pipeline is divided among its four participants, which implies the presence of four separate management companies and the division of responsibility between them.

Another major trans-Afghan energy project linking Pakistan with the countries of Central Asia is the Central and South Asia Regional Electricity Market (CASAREM), which includes the largest component of CASA-1000, which transfers electricity from Central Asia to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The project was launched in 2011 with funding from the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, as well as the US and the UK¹¹. The project involving Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan was launched in 2018 with prospects for expansion to include Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, despite security concerns and a lack of funds to implement¹².

The CASA-1000 project appears to have the best prospects for implementation. It does not require the same kind of investment as TAPI, and its implementation is facilitated by the improved conditions for cooperation in Central Asia, and the continued ability of the Taliban to control the territory of Afghanistan.

Problems and Prospects for the Development of transport corridors

Pakistan offers the countries of Central Asia the potential for the shortest access to the Indian Ocean. However, these alluring prospects remain unrealized, and Pakistan is connected with the countries of Central Asia by transport communications through China for now. The PRC and the IRP are separated by the Himalayan Range, through which the Karakoram Highway is laid. There is a highway connecting Tajikistan and China (Dushanbe - Kulyab - Khorog - Kulma - Karakoram)¹³. In October 2017, a new transport corridor Tashkent - Andijan - Osh - Irkeshtam - Kashgar was opened at the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev¹⁴. At the same time, the use of these opportunities is complicated by the mountainous terrain, but, more importantly, these communications significantly lengthen the distances between countries.

¹¹ O projekte CASA-1000. - <https://www.casa-1000.org/ru/o-proekte-casa-1000/59> / O projekte. CASA-1000. - <https://www.casa-1000.org/ru/o-proekte-casa-1000/>

¹² See: Catherine Putz. CASA-1000 Creeps toward Construction Bridging Central and South Asia. February 08, 2018 - <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/casa-1000-creeps-toward-construction-bridging-central-and-south-asia/>

¹³ See: Catherine Putz. Tajik Leader in China, Building Roads. September 03, 2015 - <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/tajik-leader-in-china-building-roads/>

¹⁴ See: CPEC is now connected with Central Asia by road network while bypassing Afghanistan. February 20, 2018 - <https://obortunity.org/2018/02/20/cpec-now-connected-central-asia-road-network-bypassing-afghanistan/>

Meanwhile, the main advantage of trans-Afghan transport communications is the ability to make the process of commodity exchange faster and cheaper. Islamabad is closer to Tashkent than Karachi, and the capital of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, is only an hour's flight from the capital of Pakistan.

Pakistan is considering building a railway through Afghanistan. Initially, from the side of Central Asia, the nearest railway stations were Serkhetabad (Kushka), Turkmenistan, and Termez, Uzbekistan.

Turkmenistan has completed the construction of a railway from the border station Imamnazar to the Afghan station Akina. Further plans include a connection with the Khafa (Iran) - Herat (Afghanistan) branch in the settlement of Turgundi. This path is part of the "Lapis Lazuli Transport Corridor", passing along the route Afghanistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey¹⁵.

However, Pakistan is interested in continuing the railway construction in the south direction, to the cities of Kandahar and Quetta, from where routes go to the ports of Gwadar and Karachi. Implementing this project is perhaps as difficult as TAPI. First of all, Turkmenistan is interested in using the "Lapis Lazuli Transport Corridor", which is given a central place. The construction of a railway to the south requires both security guarantees and adequate funding, which was more available during the construction of the "Lapis Lazuli Transport Corridor", but these opportunities have all but disappeared after the change of power in Afghanistan in 2021. In addition, Pakistan's western province of Baluchistan itself needs investment in infrastructure development, including transport, as well as security.

An alternative route is a railway from Tajikistan through the Wakhan Corridor to Pakistan, to the cities of Peshawar, Islamabad, and Lahore, and further to the seaports of Karachi and Gwadar. At the same time, Tajikistan should connect its railway, which reaches the Afghan border, through the territory of Afghanistan with the "Lapis Lazuli Transport Corridor", which is the western rather than the southern direction.

The best option for Pakistan remains the land route linking the country with Uzbekistan. The existing railway line Termez - Mazar-i-Sharif became the first Afghan railway. Uzbekistan and Pakistan are interested in its continuation through the Salang Pass to Kabul, and then through the Afghan Jalalabad to the Pakistani Peshawar, the capital of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and a major

¹⁵ Özge Eletek. Lapis Lazuli Corridor: A Gate on the Beijing-London Line, 2021 - <https://www.ankasam.org/lapis-lazuli-corridor-a-gate-on-the-beijing-london-line/?lang=en>

railway center. Then the railways lead to the largest cities of Pakistan - Rawalpindi, Lahore, Multan¹⁶, and, more importantly in the context of Uzbekistan's interests, to Pakistani seaports.

Uzbekistan and Pakistan are interested in the implementation of transport corridor projects linking both states. China is also interested in the development of transport communications, especially given the relatively low efficiency of the route from Central to South Asia via the Karakoram Highway. China's proposed Belt and Road Initiative includes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the route connecting the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region with Central Asia as separate destinations and trans-Afghan communications can combine them into a single project in which the initial priority Pakistan, as a more significant partner for the PRC, can be compensated by the openness of foreign policy and the readiness for the cooperation of Uzbekistan as a state that largely determines the regional processes in Central Asia.

Active work on promoting the project of the trans-Afghan railway ("Kabul Corridor") began during the period of the pro-American government of A. Ghani and the US forces and their allies supported him in Afghanistan. In particular, during the SCO summit in 2017, a meeting was held between the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev and the Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan N. Sharif, during which the "Practical Action Plan for the Further Development of Cooperation between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan" (Roadmap) was approved¹⁷. Intense negotiations between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan seemed to advance the potential of the PRI, which offered "critical land routes" and logistical opportunities for trade and energy transactions within Central Asia and between regions¹⁸.

The change in the situation in Afghanistan in August 2021 had a significant impact on the implementation of trans-Afghan projects. On the one hand, the end of the conflict and the establishment of peace solved one of the key problems - ensuring security. On the other hand, the lack of international recognition and

¹⁶ Ansar Jamil. Central Asia's Quest for Warm Waters: From the Caspian Sea to Gwadar Port - https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/6-SS_Ansar-Jamil_No-3_2017.pdf

¹⁷ See: Sotrudnichestvo Respubliki Uzbekistan so stranami Srednego, Blizhnego Vostoka i Afriki. - Ofitsial'nyy sayt MID Respubliki Uzbekistan. - <https://mfa.uz/ru/cooperation/countries/> / Сотрудничество Республики Узбекистан со странами Среднего, Ближнего Востока и Африки. - Официальный сайт МИД Республики Узбекистан. - <https://mfa.uz/ru/cooperation/countries/59/>

¹⁸ See: Pakistan's Membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). - <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/chile/pr-details.php?prID=5063>

criticism of the domestic policies of the Taliban government makes it extremely difficult for international financial institutions to finance trans-Afghan projects.

Meanwhile, Pakistan, like the countries of Central Asia, does not have significant potential for investment in trans-Afghan projects. Thus, foreign investment, carried out mainly within the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, remains the main factor in economic growth for Pakistan. In addition, Pakistan in its economic development is forced to rely on the assistance of international financial institutions¹⁹.

Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan continue to look for opportunities to build the Termez-Mazari-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway, based on the fact that it is the main platform for economic growth and interregional interaction. The complexity of implementing such a large initiative leads countries to implement lower-cost projects, such as the development of a road link between Uzbekistan and Pakistan through Afghanistan, or the construction of power lines. This sequence underscores the intention to push for the full implementation of trans-Afghan projects.

SCO in the Context of Pakistan's Central Asia Policy

Joining the SCO has been a longtime goal of Islamabad²⁰. The organization was established in 2001 and was a new tool for a multilateral cooperation, as well as new geopolitical opportunities. Pakistan highly values its membership in the SCO and sees it as in line with the country's long-term foreign policy goals²¹.

Pakistan sees prospects for solving common problems, including the creation of economic and strategic complementarity²². Pakistan considers the problems of terrorism and extremism, the development of economic cooperation, including the spheres of transport communications and energy resources, the promotion of its transit potential, and the strengthening of security among the priority areas of cooperation²³.

Pakistan considers the SCO as an opportunity to strengthen its position in Central Asia, including to promote the realization of transport and communication

¹⁹ See: Godovoy obzor sostoyaniya ekonomiki i vneshneekonomicheskoy deyatel'nosti Islamskoy Respubliki Koreya za 2017 god. - <http://www.ved.gov.ru/exportcountries/pk/> / Годовой обзор состояния экономики и основных направлений внешнеэкономической деятельности Исламской Республики Пакистан за 2017 год. - <http://www.ved.gov.ru/exportcountries/pk/>

²⁰ Mir Sherbaz Khetran. SCO Membership and Pakistan: Prospects of Relations with Central Asia. - https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/6-SS_Mir_Sherbaz_Khetran_No-2_2019.pdf

²¹ Ibid

²² Pakistan's Membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). - <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/chile/pr-details.php?prID=5063>

²³ Ibid

potential, materializing its advantageous geopolitical location, which is characterized as a "natural link" between the "Eurasian Heartland" and South Asia and the Arabian Sea²⁴. In addition to strengthening cooperation with the countries of Central Asia, Pakistan views the SCO as a key structure in ensuring peace, security, and stability in Eurasia²⁵.

Participation in the SCO enables Pakistan to strengthen the Central Asian direction of its foreign policy. The SCO allows Pakistan to conduct regular dialogue with the countries of Central Asia, inform about its policies and interests, jointly discuss issues of regional and world politics, and generally contribute to building trust and increasing cooperation.

Pakistan is promoting the ideas of developing trade, economic, transport, and communication cooperation, seeking to use this format of multilateral cooperation as the main tool for realizing its interests in Central Asia within the framework of the SCO²⁶.

Conclusion

Pakistan's foreign policy priorities in Central Asia are centered around the realization of the economic, transport, communication, and geopolitical potential of cooperation. The modern Central Asian policy of the IRP is more pragmatic than at the initial stage of interaction.

Pakistan's priority is given to trans-Afghan projects in the field of transport cooperation. Plans for the implementation of TAPI and the development of CASA-1000 remain priorities for economic cooperation.

The main focus of Pakistan's policy in the field of trans-Afghan transport communications is on the "Kabul Corridor" with the participation of Uzbekistan. There are options for building a railway in a southerly direction from Turkmenistan and even from Tajikistan, even though for these two Central Asian countries the use of the "Lapis Lazuli Transport Corridor" is a priority.

The SCO is another dimension of Pakistan's Central Asian foreign policy. Pakistan sees the opportunity to strengthen its international position, and the security situation, and use additional tools in realizing its geostrategic and geo-

²⁴ See: Meena Singh Roy. Pakistan's Strategies in Central Asia. Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis (India), 2006. - https://idsa.in/strategicanalysis/PakistansStrategiesinCentralAsia_msroy_1006

²⁵ See: 17th Meeting of the Council of Heads of Government (CHG) of SCO Member States. Press Release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan. - <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=NjksOQ>,

²⁶ See: Arhama Siddiq. Significance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for Pakistan. Institute for Strategic Studies (Pakistan). - <http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Final-Issue-brief-arhama-dated-09-6-2016.pdf>

economic potential. Participation itself for Pakistan means its greater interaction with the countries of Central Asia and strengthening the Central Asian direction of its foreign policy.

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<https://business.com.tm/post/8928/pakistan-turkmenistan-mull-timely-completion-of-tapi-gas-pipeline-project>