

The Kabul Corridor: Opportunities and Challenges for Pakistan

Mehvish Amir¹

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of International Relations, NUML Islamabad, Visiting Faculty,
Department of International Relations, NUML Rawalpindi. mehwish.amir@numl.edu.pk

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Abstract

This paper examines the strategic value and multidimensional implications of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway, usually referred to as the Kabul Corridor, on the regional economic integration of Pakistan and its geopolitical standings. By taking on a qualitative methodology and using secondary data, the question investigated is as follows: How far can the Kabul Corridor help Pakistan on its way towards becoming a regional trade and transit hub despite prevailing regional security and political challenges? The evidence shows that, despite the fact that the corridor provides Pakistan with lots of economic opportunities, such as the possible decrease of transport costs by up to 40 %, the decrease of the time of cargo delivery by five days, and the increased exports to the Central Asia by more than 1 billion USD, it is exposing Islamabad to a great risk. These threats are insecurity in Afghanistan (e.g., ISKP, TTP), instability in Pakistan (e.g., Baloch insurgency), diplomatic tensions with Kabul, and limitations on the financial and technical implementation of the projects. In addition, competition in the region with other trade corridors, especially Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), has made it difficult to fulfill the Pakistani dream of offering a north-south transit hub. The paper therefore concludes that although the Kabul Corridor has all the potential of transforming regional transit dynamics to the advantage of Pakistan, its materialization will be determined by quality multilateral coordination, political stability and in the long-term investment on regional peace-building initiatives. The success of the corridor can be viable with the continuance of adaptive and security-sensitive policy approach.

Key Words: Kabul Corridor, Regional Connectivity, Geopolitical Strategy, Infrastructure Development, Afghanistan Security.

Introduction

The Kabul Corridor refers specifically to the project of Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway line, a high-profile plan to plant a direct rail route throughout Afghanistan. This railway is planned to interlink Termez in Uzbekistan, to pass through Afghanistan via Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul and to reach Peshawar in Pakistan. Approximately 647km in length, the project is planned to be the first direct rail connection between the Central Asian and South Asian regions and hence a land bridge of extremely crucial significance between two economically vibrant regions (Umarov, 2025). Once it is done successfully it would significantly change the nature of trade in the region by introducing a new, efficient channel of goods and people.

Historical Context of Afghanistan as a Transit Hub

Being physically located at the border of Central, South and West Asia, Afghanistan has traditionally played a central transit role, connecting Central Asia with seaports of the Indian Ocean and allowing the sea trade through Pakistan and Iran (SpecialEurasia, 2025). This role,

which has its roots in very ancient history, can be illustrated by such passages as the Wakhan Corridor and the Khyber Pass that were a part of the Silk Route centuries ago. These routes were not mere trade routes; they also encompassed the military choke points that were crucial to the military strategy and marked the decline and ascendancy of empires, the spread of cultures, and the movement of goods across Central Asia and Indian subcontinent. These routes from history till the date have a sustaining value is one basic geopolitical need: the need to connect Central and South Asia (Amir I. , 2023). It is this perceived vital role of such linkages in regional integration and economic development that is emphasized by the current effort to create the Kabul Corridor, despite all the historical and continual challenges involved. This long-term resolve to be interlinked despite the nature of the political scenario or the state of the economy has a strong foundation in the geographical realities of the region.

Pakistan's Overarching Strategic Interest in Central Asian Connectivity

The growing interest of Pakistan in Central Asia is influenced by a combination of a number of strategic factors primarily, which are the geographic contiguity, historically interconnected cultural and civilizational ties, and the substantial economic prospects of the states of Central Asia. Specifically, Islamabad aims to develop itself as an important outlet of energy exports and regional trade, which would allow the exchange of commodities and resources between Central Asia, South Asia, and beyond (Naeem, 2025). This is one of the most important goals of Pakistan in its determination to be a major hub in trade as well as transit. Central Asian states landlocked by the mountainous region may gain direct access to the warmwater ports of Pakistan, particularly Karachi and Gwadar through its territory, and Islamabad aspires to be a crucial hub in international trading circles. This strategy is not limited to economic gain but means to ensure that Pakistan becomes the primary conduit of trade between Eurasia and could change the overall balance of power in the region. Therefore, the Kabul Corridor is to be perceived not only as an infrastructural project, but also as a strategic tool to be used by Pakistan in its foreign policy, aimed at transforming the regional situation and providing Islamabad with the necessary role in Eurasian trade, which would affect the role of other regional players (Pakistan identifies six new trade corridors, 2025).

Opportunities for Pakistan: A Gateway to Regional Prosperity

The Kabul Corridor is a multidimensional opportunity offering a significant amount of economic growth accompanied by increasing the geopolitical status of Pakistan.

Economic Benefits

There are some economic payoffs that are likely to be produced by systematic deployment and continued management of the Kabul Corridor. Analytical projections have also indicated that the project will reduce the regional transport costs up to 40 per cent and decrease the time with cargo, transported between Uzbekistan and Pakistan by up to five days. These efficiency increases are necessary to quicken the trade flows and make them cost-effective to provide enhanced access of Central Asia to the world markets through the ports of the Indian Ocean located in Pakistan. The railway is predicted to transport a huge quantity of freight- estimates are between 18-20 million tons per annum to fifteen million tons by the year 2030- hence becoming a new economic supply route to the region (Ahmed, 2025). Another major plus point will be additional access to the Central Asian markets in case of Pakistan, and the estimated exports to the countries of Central Asia is expected to increase by US\$ 1 billion. Such an increase in trade capacity and exports in this region provides a major economic boom. It is also estimated that the corridor will bring significant revenue to Pakistan in terms of transit charges and expansion of its transport and logistics facilities. In addition, the Pakistani ports such as Karachi and Gwadar will enjoy economies of scale, because of the increased traffic of the corridor, both to and out of

Afghanistan and Central Asia. If this interdependence is successfully developed, it is likely to help bring about strong incentives to regional stability and cooperation, considering that destabilization would cause high economic costs to all actors. This means that the economic advantages of the corridor will be a form of strategic instrument in promoting long-term political stability.

Geopolitical and Strategic Advantages

The said rail corridor is an important strategic asset, to which Pakistan is trying to emerge as one of the main economic channels connecting Central Asia, China, and Middle East. In the wider geopolitical setup of Islamabad, the project is used as a strategic lever, the purpose of which is to increase the impact of the country in the region. The project has already helped to normalize the relations between Islamabad and Kabul and to restore fully diplomatic relations. The result of this type of cooperation is regional integration and cooperation in techniques design, which are crucial aspects of large-scale infrastructure projects. Regional observers argue that such close collaboration can reduce Indian influence in the post-2021 Afghanistan and as such, it reinforces the prospective change in regional power balance towards an economic form of diplomacy spearheaded by Pakistan and its allies (Pakistan identifies six new trade corridors, 2025). In addition, the Kabul Corridor connects with other developing transit routes, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INTSC) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provided by Beijing. In case the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway is realized fully, there is a possibility of its integration and rebranding as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China, making it even more important in terms of its regional and global importance.

Synergies with Other Regional Initiatives

The importance of the Kabul Corridor is multiplied by the fact that it is aligned with other initiatives of regional connectivity. CPEC is the most notable of such affinities, especially following the recent three-party agreement between China, Pakistan and the Taliban-led Afghan government that extends CPEC to Afghanistan. The extension of CPEC to Afghanistan aims to boost the Afghan economy and connectivity in the region since both corridors will be linked directly (Tang, Zhang, & Wang, 2025). This level of convergence reflects a synchronized strategic outlook between China and Pakistan to create a fully integrated, interconnected trade flow, providing the necessary financial resources and infrastructure development skills to overcome the inherent obstacles of the Kabul Corridor and thus strengthening an axis between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan economically (Islami, 2025). The Wakhan Corridor is a geographical, historical, and geopolitical hot spot, making it a useful asset according to Pakistan. A similar infrastructure would allow Pakistan to tap the north, in terms of trade, tourism and even job creation in addition to providing a better security to the region by increasing its military wing and by foiling the terrorist's movement. The modern efforts to gain influence over Wakhan are fueled by the rational of having direct and safe trade road to the Central Asia and hence avoid the expected instabilities in other transit routes in Afghanistan. However, the new system of regional interconnection is characterized by the increasing competition. Another, still developing, multimodal network is the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), where Russia is actively promoting Iran to use its transit facilities to export to Pakistan. At the same time, India is seeking INSTC connectivity using Chabahar Port with the hope of developing transport connectivity between Afghanistan and Central Asia by bypassing Pakistan (The Russia, Iran INSTC Transit Roadmap Through to South Asia: Updates, 2025). Similarly, Afghanistan is aiming at lowering its dependence on the Pakistani ports as it is trying to find alternative routes via Iran and Central Asia, the most prominent to date is the Lapis Lazuli Corridor (Umarova, 2025). This makes Kabul Corridor just one of the possible routes. To keep its position of a

gateway nation and to maintain its competitive position, Pakistan must make sure that its infrastructure situated in Wakhan will be the most effective, safe, and cost-efficient solution available. The last question is, will the Kabul Corridor be successful? This will depend on whether it can beat or rationally overlap these other routes.

Challenges for Pakistan: Navigating a Complex Landscape

Despite the promising opportunities that the Kabul Corridor project proposes, several interrelated economic, security, and political limitations await it, the realization of which can erode the successful execution of the project and limit the prospects of Pakistan to achieve its own potential.

Economic and Infrastructure Hurdles

The magnitude of investment brought up by the Trans-Afghan Railway (TAR) is not something seen in the region before as estimates range somewhere between US\$4.5 billion and US\$8 billion thus the financing requirements of the project are quite high, and they need long-term commitment (SpecialEurasia, 2025). The political situation makes it extremely difficult: the patchy international recognition that has not been given to the Taliban government excludes bilateral relations and limits exposure to the development aid of multilateral donors and financial institutions, which would be the source of the viability of the project. Even though, Qatar has become a key financier, the concerns exist on whether it can finance the entire project, as well as to control global transit systems. The half-done feasibility reports, cost-benefit analyses that remain in limbo, and the bickered-over route-security analyses add to the confusion of the economic image. That uncertainty is only compounded by the fact that it is only expected in the first half of 2026 that the feasibility report would be published (Interfax, 2025). One of the technical matters which is outstanding is the use of the 1520 mm track gauge by the Taliban interim government in its section on the railway as opposed to what is an anticipated Pakistani standard. This mismatch of gauges is not merely technical engineering matter; it requires expensive, time-consuming transshipment points at the border or at least doubling of rail tracks, a significant reduction in the dream of a simplified, efficient corridor and hence an increase in the literal costs and duration of travel. On top of the railway itself, there is inadequate border infrastructure which makes trade difficult. Important crossings like Torkham are characterized by violence, low storage facility, unacceptable cold-chain facilities, and limited space that causes wastage of perishable foods and suppresses export of Central Asian products. In addition, the transaction times and trade costs are increased by layers of clearance work, redundant checks, and repetitive bureaucratic formalities (Amir & Shakoor, 2025). At the same time, Pakistan is aspiring to improving its exports to Central Asia, but its exports are limited at present. Its export blend, which is widely textiles, sports articles, surgical equipment, rice, and a few harvested products, fails to meet the needs of Central Asian fully, due to its poor industry and few improved innovations.

Security Risks and Instability

The security situation in Afghanistan and its borders with Pakistan is a major hindrance to the feasibility of Trans-Afghan Corridor. Specifically, the reemergence of the Taliban to power in 2021 has created an ongoing sense of uncertainty, the fact that the Islamic State Wilayat Khorasan (ISKP) remains a major player in security calculations makes the Afghanistan region exceedingly difficult to predict (Shabbir, 2024). ISKP still has the ability to conduct focused violence and actions in opposition to operational sabotage. At the same time, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) uses supposed safe havens in Afghanistan and thus trans-border militancy threat to Pakistan is a sustained one. Tensions between the Durand Line have been visible throughout history and frequent conflicts have created what some observers describe as a

quasi-military standoff making the further expansion of the corridor challenging. When major trade gateways on the borders between the two countries are frequently closed, trade movement is disrupted, and both nations suffer significant losses in terms of money (Kalem, 2024). Another factor that led to an increase in socio-economic pressure in Afghanistan and reduced the viability of the corridor is the deportation of over 80,000 Afghans by Pakistan in April 2025. Locally, there is the issue of security put up by the Baloch separatism cited by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). The connectivity of the corridor with the ports like Gwadar is in the Balochistan province. These infrastructure projects often face opposition from the locals because to them, these projects are an addition to the power and mobility of the central government. BLA, which has been declared as a terrorist group by Pakistan, has been continuously attacking the railway lines, and this had been a source of concern regarding the safety of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and consequently the Trans-Afghan Corridor. This threat is demonstrated by a chain of over 150 attacks that most of them have been targeted against Chinese nationals. The combination of these internal instabilities in Afghanistan, the cross-border militancy, and Baloch separatism within Pakistan creates a compounding type of risk that cannot be represented by isolated incidents. The constant insecurity makes foreign investment unfriendly, construction and sustainability of operations difficult, making security the all-encompassing key to feasibility. In case a powerful global force like China is facing difficulties in terms of securing its CPEC projects in Balochistan, it casts grave concerns about safeguarding the Kabul Corridor (Gafarov & Boltaev, 2025). Pakistan is also susceptible to bigger trans-border militancy and illegal activities such as drug trafficking. The Durand line is often termed as one of the most hazardous borders in the world. It is estimated that 45 percent of illegal drugs that are produced in Afghanistan pass via Pakistan.

Political and Diplomatic Complexities

The lack of recognition of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan creates significant political and diplomatic barriers of the nation concerning participation in the international projects that involve legal responsibility. This lack of official recognition does not allow Afghanistan to contribute to transnational programs which require legal frameworks hence limiting acquisition of essential finances by international donors and development banks. At the same time, local dynamics, and the varying priorities in major stakeholders, i.e., Russia, China, and Pakistan, increase the likelihood of conflicting interests that can undermine joint planning and implementation. Other barriers to seamless integration are that the rail tracks are of different gauges, customs procedures are different and some other technical differences. The Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar Corridor is a case in point, where its proposed accessibility to South Asia is impeded by the fact that India, the biggest economy in the region has not engaged directly. Although there was a high-level consultation recently and the level of bilateral trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan increased by 23 % in April 2025, the total transit trade via Pakistan reduced by 84 % largely due to anti-smuggling efforts by Pakistan (Rahmati, 2025). The permanent political wrangling, partial border shut down (e.g., Wagah and Torkham), and counter tariff rise have hurt the economic interests of both sides' traders. Accusations of terrorist act with TTP on the Afghanistan soil also exist and form a major source of distrust. Therefore, even though the economic benefits of the Kabul Corridor and related transit trade are rather evident, the frequency of political and security-related wrangles continues to create a disproportionate level of tension, which further highlights the importance of a long-standing bilateral trust in terms of optimal operational viability. The intricacy of the scenario is compounded by the fact that India has been seeking alternative routes, and the most obvious of them include the Chabahar Port in Iran, the INSTC, which have the intended purpose of bypassing Pakistan. These trends undermine the salience of the Kabul Corridor to the regional discourse and inject competition to the connectivity agenda of Pakistan. Moreover, the exit of Western allies and

especially United States in Afghanistan and subsequent boycotting of the Taliban regime has denied Afghanistan critical financial aid in the form of huge contribution in the infrastructure development projects hence increasing funding shortages (Usman, 2025).

Current Status and Future Outlook

The initiative of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railroad has been developed in a gradual way and in a complicated regional context. In February 2021, the formal roadmap of this strategic corridor between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan is set out. There is a special department of coordination located in Tashkent, which has been operating since 2023 (Gafarov & Boltaev, 2025). Diplomatic and technical work began to accelerate in April 2024, when Termez played host to the first meeting of working group aimed at formulating a broader multimodal transport corridor that embraces Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. One of the primary proponents, Russia stated that it would have the feasibility study completed at the beginning of 2026. The Russian Ministry of Transport also declared the beginning of the implementation stage of the project on 8 April 2025 and sent specialists to start feasibility studies on two lines, in particular, the Kabul Corridor (Termez-Naibabad-Logar-Kharlachi). The current momentum suggests that the construction can start as soon as the second half of 2025, and a phased commissioning, between 2027 and 2030 is possible. The ongoing pursuit by Uzbekistan and other regional players to build the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway and the Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat-Kandahar-Chaman corridor (Kandahar Corridor) is a display of strategic orientation that is associated with diversification. The Kabul Corridor is clearly a priority, but the simultaneous moves towards alternative or complementary routes are indicative of a geopolitical and security-wise-grounded realization of insecurities that breeds redundancy. The recent developments concerning Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) give a mixed pattern. After an over a year break, top-level trade talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan reinstituted in April 2025, with aims of streamlining and revising APTTA and easing movements of cargo (Paswan). The bilateral trade also grew significantly with the amount hitting 119 million USD in April 2025 which was a 23 percent growth in comparison to March. However, the transit trade of Afghanistan through Pakistan plummeted drastically by 84 percent due to the anti-smuggling efforts by Pakistan. Such a shrinking has caused Afghanistan to find alternative accesses through Iran and Central Asia which may reduce the role of Pakistan as the transit hub itself. As has been seen, the resulting bilateral trade with the dramatic reduction in the transit trade is a significant discrepancy. Even as direct commercialities between the two states are in the process of being enhanced, Pakistan faces increased pressure on its role as a gateway state, not only by external competition but also internally, through its own policies, most notably the anti-smuggling policy. At the same time, there are additional energy and connectivity projects in progress. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline is still under consideration in the region regarding energy security. Pakistan and Turkmenistan renewed their mutual commitment to TAPI in April 2025 (Onyango, 2025). The Afghan officials expect the pipeline to reach Herat by the end of 2025; there is already progress in reaching 14 of 153 kilometers in Afghanistan. When completed, TAPI is expected to yield around 1 billion USD in earning revenues on an annual basis as well as provide over 12,000 jobs through Afghanistan, which would mean that it has economic stabilization potentials in the region. Such dynamics of Kabul Corridor evolution may be modelled to reveal several probable trajectories.

Progressive Implementation (High Probability): This situation presupposes the continuity of collaboration between stakeholders, which may lead to the start of the construction process by the end of 2025 and the gradual opening of the corridor in 2027-2030.

Partial Stagnation because of Security Deterioration (Moderate Probability): The intensification of the violence exerted by transnational militant groups like ISKP might force strategic actors into reducing or withdrawing their participation in the current programs altogether, which will extend the timeframes or shift their resources towards less risky, but potentially more taxing alternatives.

Strategic Alignment and Accelerated Execution (Low Probability): In this favorable case, the interests of Russian, Chinese, Pakistani and Central Asian parties overlap in a significant way, allowing the rapid development of projects with the help of joint funding, standardized engineering, and a shortened construction period.

Conclusion

The Kabul Corridor forms an opportunity of transformation to Pakistan, with a channel that can accrue to it its position as a key economic and strategic hub in the region. The corridor will connect landlocked states in Central Asia to the deep-sea ports of Pakistan on the Arabian Sea and will deliver significant economic benefits such as significant decreases in transport costs and transportation times. This can be predicted to increase trade, as well as enhance diplomatic relations resulting in a stronger central economic conduit role of Pakistan in Eurasia. The achievement of these goals is, however, hampered by deep-seated and everlasting problems. Insecurity in Afghanistan, which has been characterized by militant groups like the ISKP and TTP, is coupled with the issue of insecurity in Pakistan, especially the Baloch separatism. This situation forms a very risky operating environment of infrastructure development. Moreover, the instability of border dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the frayed diplomatic ties often disconnect the flow of trade and pitfalls the spirit of trust and cooperation that is the key to the success of the corridor. The logistical needs, technical mismatches like the disparities among railway gauges, and improper infrastructure at the borders are barriers to economic development and integration. Simultaneously, the competitive geopolitical region, in which the other powers are trying to acquire alternative routes, threatens the adjacent potential centrality of the Kabul Corridor. To make the Kabul Corridor as successful as possible, Pakistan will have to manage this complex interchange of intrastate and international concerns with long-term thinking and patience. This will need a multi-faceted resolution which will not only give emphasis on security but will foster diplomatic confidence along with strong development of infrastructure. The success of the corridor is not only an economic venture, but it is a crucial experiment of cooperation of the region, stability, and ability of Pakistan to define and pursue its strategic vision in a fast-changing geopolitical environment.

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