

PAKISTAN, CENTRAL ASIA, AND THE TRANSCHINA TRADE CORRIDOR

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

Tashkent and Islamabad have [agreed to](#) expand bilateral trade through routes traversing China, as Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions and the war in Iran have disrupted existing trade links. Pakistan's conflict with Afghanistan has made the prospects for trans-Afghan corridors connecting Central Asia with Pakistan increasingly uncertain. Meanwhile, renewed U.S.-Iran fighting has made trans-Iranian routes an unreliable option for Pakistan's trade with Central Asia. Pakistan and Central Asian states such as Kyrgyzstan are therefore promoting an overland route through China that bypasses Afghanistan. Besides providing Pakistan and Central Asia with a corridor avoiding both Afghanistan and Iran, this route creates opportunities to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), into Central Asia.

BACKGROUND: Afghanistan has long represented the most viable transit route for trade between Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs). However, decades of conflict have prevented plans for a Trans-Afghan trade corridor connecting Central Asia with Pakistan from materialising. More recently, escalating Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions over cross-border terrorism have further undermined prospects for developing these routes. Relations deteriorated sharply in October 2025 following border clashes, prompting Islamabad to suspend truck-borne trade through the main Torkham and Chaman crossings. In February 2026, Islamabad declared an [open war](#) against Afghanistan and launched airstrikes targeting alleged terrorist sanctuaries inside the country.

In April, Islamabad [opened](#) six overland transit routes for goods destined for Iran amid the U.S. blockade of Iranian ports. These routes allowed goods from third countries to transit Pakistan and enter Iran by road. The designated corridors connect Pakistani seaports with two Iranian border crossings, providing a viable route towards Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In April, Islamabad [dispatched](#) its first shipment of frozen meat to Tashkent via Iran.

Pakistan activated new routes through Iran for trade with the CARs, but renewed U.S.-Iran hostilities over the Strait of Hormuz have undermined their viability. The trans-China route has consequently emerged as the most viable and secure remaining option for trade between Pakistan and Central Asia. Both sides are therefore increasingly prioritizing the development of the trans-China trade corridor.

The trans-China option has long featured in discussions between Pakistani and Central Asian leaders due to security concerns in Afghanistan. In November 2025, Uzbekistan and Pakistan [agreed to develop trade along two major land routes](#) bypassing Afghanistan: the Pakistan-China-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan and Pakistan-China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan corridors.

In April, Kyrgyzstan successfully [tested](#) an overland route to Pakistan via China, bypassing Afghanistan. A truck carrying Kyrgyz goods reached the Pakistani port of Karachi via China along the Karakoram Highway. Islamabad considers routes connecting Pakistan with Bishkek and Almaty more secure than the Trans-Afghan alternatives.

Several Central Asian leaders have [visited](#) Pakistan over the past ten months. Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov visited Islamabad in December 2025, followed by Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in February 2026. Their discussions with Pakistani leaders focused primarily on connectivity projects providing the CARs with access to Pakistan's seaports at Karachi, Gwadar, and Bin Qasim.

Uzbekistan and Pakistan have [agreed](#) to amend their transit trade agreement to formally incorporate the China corridor. This would allow goods to transit through the Sost dry port and western China before reaching Central Asia. In July, Uzbekistan's Deputy Prime Minister was scheduled to visit Pakistan, but the visit was [postponed](#) at Tashkent's request. During the visit, the two countries were expected to sign a protocol formally incorporating the China corridor into their transit trade agreement.

Currently, routes through China have become Pakistan's preferred option for regional connectivity and the extension of CPEC.

IMPLICATIONS: Deteriorating relations with the Taliban regime, recurring border clashes, and terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan have prompted a major shift in Islamabad's Afghanistan policy, accelerating its turn towards routes through China. While the activation of the China corridor could undermine planned connectivity projects between Pakistan and the CARs, it may strengthen alternative regional initiatives. The future of the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (UAP) railway, for instance, appears increasingly uncertain. Launched in 2021, the [UAP railway](#) aims to connect Central Asia with Pakistani seaports through Afghanistan.

Conversely, completion of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway could make Pakistan's Gwadar port one of the shortest trade routes for Central Asia. The CKU railway is a strategic [connectivity project](#) linking Kashgar in China with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. From Kashgar, existing and planned transport links could connect the railway southwards with Gwadar through CPEC, providing Central Asia with access to the Arabian Sea.

Infrastructure development could further increase trade along the China corridor. Key [projects](#) include upgrading the Karachi–Peshawar ML-1 railway, expanding the Karakoram Highway, developing Gwadar Port as a warm-water outlet for the CARs, and expanding dry ports and logistics networks. Together, these projects could improve the efficiency and capacity of the China route.

Although Beijing, Islamabad, and Kabul have already [agreed to extend](#) CPEC to Afghanistan and Central Asia, the China corridor could accelerate its direct extension into Central Asia. CPEC connects China's Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Gwadar port in Balochistan through a network of highways, railways, and energy infrastructure.

The [rerouting](#) will provide Pakistan with an alternative route to Central Asia while maintaining Uzbekistan's access to the Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi.

Uzbekistan has emerged as Pakistan's key [economic partner](#) in Central Asia. Although the China corridor bypasses instability in both Afghanistan and Iran, it is longer and more expensive than the Trans-Afghan route due to greater distances, higher handling costs, additional border procedures, and longer transit times. The China corridor could therefore serve as a strategic alternative in the short term, but is unlikely to fully replace the Afghan route commercially in the longer term. Improved infrastructure along the

China route could enable Pakistan to connect with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan via the Khunjerab Pass.

CONCLUSIONS: Geopolitics and security will ultimately determine the development of trade corridors between Pakistan and the CARs. The Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict has undermined prospects for the Trans-Afghan corridor, while the war in Iran has reduced the viability of the Trans-Iranian route. Under these conditions, the Trans-China corridor offers a comparatively secure and viable alternative for both Pakistan and the CARs. It could therefore serve as a strategic safeguard against regional instability stemming from conflicts in Afghanistan and Iran.

Pakistan's importance as a trade outlet is widely recognized in Central Asia. The landlocked CARs seek access to Pakistani seaports through Afghanistan, Iran, or China to facilitate global trade. However, growing security concerns surrounding the Afghan and Iranian routes are likely to increase Central Asian interest in accessing Pakistani ports through the comparatively secure China corridor.

Pakistan, China, and the CARs could enhance the corridor by improving infrastructure, extending CPEC into Central Asia, and streamlining cargo clearance procedures at their borders. Such measures could address existing constraints and make the China route more cost-effective and commercially attractive.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Syed Fazl-e-Haider is a Karachi-based analyst at the [Wikistrat](#). He is a freelance columnist and the author of several books. He has contributed articles and analysis to a range of publications. He is a regular contributor to Eurasia Daily Monitor of [Jamestown Foundation](#). Email: sfazlehaider05@yahoo.com.