
**POLITICAL INTERESTS OF PAKISTAN IN CENTRAL ASIA:
AN ANALYSIS**

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ABSTRACT

Central Asia is one of the main focuses of the foreign policy of Pakistan. Along with the economic and strategic objectives of its foreign policy in the region, Pakistan also has many political interests. This study aims to explain and analyze in detail the political interests of Pakistan in Central Asia. They include the strategies of Pakistan to promote friendly relations with Central Asia, make Central Asian Republics allies of Islamabad in regional and international affairs, and counter the influence of its arch-rival India in regional affairs as there is competition between India and Pakistan from the very beginning to become regional hegemon, make strong political relations with CARs to facilitate the economic interests, strengthen regional integration, strengthen ECO in order to utilize better the opportunity for securing foreign policy objectives and strengthen relations with CARs using the platform of SCO. It also analyses the successes and failures of Pakistan in securing its political interests in Central Asia.

Keywords: Pakistan, Central Asia, political interests, relations, alliance.

INTRODUCTION

One of the primary objectives of the foreign policy of Pakistan is to maintain friendly relationships with all Muslim countries in general and with the region in particular. Islamabad has constantly wanted to increase its influence in the Central Asian region. Principally different political and economic objectives have shaped the foreign

policy of Pakistan towards the region after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 and the emergence of Central Asian Republics (CARs). The independence of CARs in 1991 marked a new age of political ties between the two regions. Pakistan wanted to promote friendly relations with CARs and make them allies broadly for two reasons. First, Pakistan is surrounded by rivals from three sides, and second, to counter Indian growing influence in the region which is a permanent challenge to Islamabad's interests and security. They were encouraged to have close relations because of the historical significance of the links between the two regions. Soon, both sides started to work together more closely.

The political interests of Pakistan in Central Asia include promotion of friendly relations with CARs, breaking diplomatic isolation in the region as the country is surrounded from three sides by rivals, establish strong diplomatic relations to facilitate economic interests, make allies to get support on international forums, strengthen regional integration, strengthen Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and counter Indian influence. Though the five Central Asian Republics are different from each other and have complicated relations among themselves, Pakistan has maintained good relations with them both at mutual and multilateral levels.

The importance of relations between Central Asia and Islamabad has constantly been felt, not only due to new tendencies in regional and international political, economic and strategic strategies but also because of the previous bond of religious, cultural, and commerce ties that formed the foundation for this relationship. Though on many occasions, some political problems arose, like the Indian influence in the region and the Afghan issue; they never lost a positive approach, which has also stopped the potential issues from escalating.

In the beginning, Central Asian governments did not focus much on their Muslim neighbours, partially due to the fear of extremism and their cool ties with them under Soviet control. However, soon they realized the importance and prospects of their close political partnerships with regional Islamic countries.

PROMOTION OF FRIENDLY RELATIONS OF PAKISTAN WITH CARS

Since its independence, Pakistan has been in a dilemma of political isolation in the region as from the three sides, it is surrounded

by its opponents. Therefore, it tries to find its political allies in its peripheral regions like Central Asia. Pakistan regarded the independence of CARs as an important opportunity to make allies and break its diplomatic isolation and consolidate its position in regional affairs. Long-standing, similar cultural, historical, and ethnic ties, as well as a shared Muslim identity, were also positive indicators for Pakistan in developing and promoting comprehensive and good mutual ties with Central Asian states. The historical ties undoubtedly have a stronger impact on current collaboration and will affect the future policies of both the Central Asian Republics and Pakistan. The foreign policy of Pakistan towards Central Asia has remained unchanged since the 1990s. Islamabad has been able to build contacts with the CARs due to the change in regional politics after the fall of the USSR. Despite having similar goals and much to offer each other simultaneously, both regions still need to accomplish their goals for various reasons.

Pakistan uses different strategies and tools to strengthen and promote its relations with CARs. It wants to grow its influence in these countries in order to equip itself to advance its interests in the region better. Pakistan formed Joint Economic Commissions with all of these countries to formalize cooperation. Islamabad has provided fully financed training facilities to the officials of CARs under a specific technical aid program, including English language, accounting, banking, insurance, diplomacy, and postal service. Even on many occasions, despite the political tensions between the states, these projects proceeded unabated (Roy, 2006). Education and cultural cooperation are other key aspects of Pakistan-Central Asia ties. Many students from different CARs are doing study in different universities in Pakistan, and likewise, Pakistani students are also studying in Central Asian countries. Students from CARs have been studying business management, engineering, the English language, and information technology at Pakistani educational institutions.

Pakistan is also trying to Strengthen Relations with CARs through the platform of SCO. Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an important regional organization with an increasing stake in regional and international affairs. Following the disintegration of the USSR and the rise of the United States as the only superpower, nations such as Russian Federation and China were compelled to interact and

collaborate in order to safeguard their interests, particularly in Central Asia (Syed, 2017). It gave birth to the creation of SCO. In 1996, the Shanghai-5 was founded, which included China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, is the predecessor to the SCO. The SCO was established in 2001 when Uzbekistan joined the organization. The SCO's goals are to preserve member states interests, promote security, economic, and trade collaboration. Counterterrorism also has become a crucial area of collaboration among the members of this organization because of the development of a terrorist threat to these nations. Promoting regional connections has also been a major issue for the SCO. Regional calibration and integration can be made simpler by more connectivity among the members and partners of this organization. Permanent membership for Pakistan and India boosted regional integration and increased the strategic position and efficiency of this organization in the Central and South Asian regions. On June 9, 2017, during the 16th Heads of State Summit in Astana, Pakistan and India were admitted as full members. Pakistan was already given observer status in the SCO on July 5, 2005, and later requested permanent membership in 2010. The permanent membership status of Pakistan was decided during the 2015 Heads of State Summit in Ufa, Russia. SCO today accounts for about 40% of the population of the world and almost 20% of the total GDP of the world (Khetran, 2019).

Pakistan's admission to the SCO made a fresh beginning and a significant step in strengthening ties with other nations in the region, particularly CARs. Gaining full membership is a very good chance for Pakistan, as it allowed Islamabad to strengthen its stances and relationships in the SCO region. Being a permanent member, Islamabad expects to get much help and support in dealing with its economic, security, and social problems. Economic integration, in which regional organizations perform a key role, can help to build trust. By increasing interdependence via people-to-people interaction and cooperative initiatives, they can minimize distrust and improve regional collaboration. As member countries of this organization, Pakistan and the CARs can assist in developing deeper ties between South Asia and Central Asia, as well as join all stakeholders to help stability and peace in the whole region. Pakistan has long been keen on boosting regional connectivity and cooperation as a bridge, particularly for Central Asian countries that are landlocked. It strongly

desires to promote itself and its interests across the region. Therefore, Pakistan was interested in membership in this organization from the beginning. Pakistan views itself as a higher contributor to regional growth by having an association in SCO with two big powers of the region, China and Russia. Furthermore, full membership of Pakistan is supposed to enhance its image in the international community.

Pakistan has taken proactive diplomacy to enhance bilateral ties with all CARs. At the same time, Pakistan is expanding its interaction with neighbours via multilateralism, particularly under the SCO framework. The country's geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economics potentials are well suited not just to stimulate but also to perform a significant role in all of the SCO goals mentioned in the organization charter. The country serves as a natural connection between the SCO countries, connecting Eurasia to South Asia and the rest of the world via the Arabian Sea. It provides vital land-based routes and linkages for communally advantageous intra-regional and inter-regional trade and energy transactions. Pakistan aims to serve as a centre of economic activity, connecting surrounding countries through trains, highways, and ports, as well as an energy and trade corridor. Islamabad intends to use the SCO platform to achieve this policy goal, which might be beneficial in strengthening collaboration with CARs.

The SCO membership is also very significant from the regional security perspective. As the insecurity in Afghanistan is the main hurdle in Pakistan's connectivity with Central Asia, SCO has the capability to play a better role in the resolution of the Afghan issue. In this regard, the SCO's Regional Counter-Terrorism Structure (RATS) can be beneficial in improving collaboration and institutional consensus.

After being disappointed by the performance of the ECO, SAARC, and OIC, Pakistan is now looking to the SCO as a key component in developing its ties with its member nations. However, Pakistan's geostrategic potential has largely been wasted up until now, as the country has failed to enjoy the benefits of being a member of an efficient regional union despite its favoured position. Pakistan's full membership in the SCO offered up a slew of new prospects for the nation, as well as resurrecting several initiatives that had failed due to poor development and Pakistan's gradual retreat from the region.

QUEST FOR ALLIES

With the independence of CARs, a strategic and political balance of power in the region emerged in favour of Islamabad. It has allowed the peripheral and extended peripheral regions, including Pakistan to extend their orbit of influence and friends. Pakistan was searching for regional allies as from three sides, it is surrounded by political opponents. At the same time, the independence of CARs provided it a good opportunity to make new allies. Pakistan perceives the overall development of partnerships with these states as a very good opportunity to establish an immense cooperation zone that will assist in the strengthening of its economy, political power, and security, as well as its international political importance and foothold in the conflict with India. The altered regional and international strategic environment in the twenty-first century has made it more necessary for Islamabad to engage and sustain deeper connections with CARs actively since it may benefit Pakistan economically, politically, and strategically. There are several regional and global issues on which Pakistan and CARs agree. This is evident in their collaboration at the UN, OIC, ECO, SCO and many other international forms.

A recent conference held on July 15-16, 2021, attended by the representatives of 50 countries on inter-regional connectivity was remarkable for the deep relationships between the two regions. The mutually beneficial political and economic interests have pushed them to work together. The allies Pakistan made in Central Asia have also contributed to its foreign policy goals abroad, role in different global issues and stakes in international forums. A recent example is their working together in the peace process in Afghanistan. Pakistan and Uzbekistan are also members of the US newly announced Quad composed of United States-Afghanistan- Pakistan-Uzbekistan. It is a diplomatic forum that promotes Afghanistan's long-term peace and stability, which is very necessary for interregional connectivity. Along with the peace process, they focus on trade networks and broader connectivity. The project of the Trans-Afghan rail link started by Uzbekistan-Afghanistan and Pakistan in February 2021 is expected to strengthen their economic and trade relations and optimistically stabilize Afghanistan by making it a part of the important regional trade regime.

The rise of CARs was a potential opportunity for Islamabad to expand its presence and influence in its Western neighbours which can give strategic depth against New Delhi (Khan, 2015). Islamabad could be more convenient with the growing influence of New Delhi in Central Asia. Islamabad officially may refrain from endorsing it, but because of the ground realities in the region and growing influence, India made limited choice of Pakistan but to stay involved. Islamabad has kept two goals, although modeled on the versions of the previous policy. First, it wants to persuade its neighbours to prevent their territories from being used by India as a base against Pakistan to pressurize or destabilize the country. This contrasts with the past when Pakistan attempted to establish itself as the regional hegemon and restricted New Delhi's influence in the CARs. New Delhi is now well-established in CARs, Afghanistan, and Iran. Islamabad can only expect that its neighbours do not allow their territories to be exploited against it. Islamabad's goal to enhance its influence and presence in CARs has been at the top of its strategic thinking. Pakistan's strategic depth is purely political. The country does not want to control either Central Asian Country but to have friendly and close relations with them, which can provide leverage to Pakistan over India, which has hegemonic ambitions. Strategic depth has two dimensions. Apart from the strategic reason, the strategic depth has a political component, which deals with treaties and alliances with many friendly nations based on trade, financial, cultural, social, demographic, political, and military aspects. These might take the form of a mix of policies at the regional or international fronts, along with financial, political, and strategic cooperation between countries with comparable challenges and national interests. In Central Asia, Pakistan seeks political, not military strategic depth. The concept of strategic depth is sound. Every state aspires to obtain and maintain sovereignty in order to ensure its security. Pakistan's strategic depth policy is entirely political, and it is built on friendly ties with its neighbours.

Furthermore, Pakistan is making use of its geographical, cultural, and religious connection with CARs for developing relations due to a lack of economic and financial options. It has been growing its ideological influence throughout the region, especially in the domain of religion. Hundreds of students from CARs are studying Sharia law, economics, theology, foreign languages, and other subjects at the

International Islamic University in Islamabad on scholarships. Pakistan is using it as a soft power. These are significant aspects that impact the nature of the Pakistan-CARs relationship.

Pakistan's desire for deep economic and political ties with CARs has been hampered by its ineffective foreign policy. Only culture and historical linkages are not enough for improving future collaboration; the dynamics of the current geopolitical and new strategic interests must be considered when establishing a plan to pursue regional economic goals. Unfortunately, Pakistan's foreign policy circles could not devise sound ways to attract these countries and take profit from their potential. Pakistan needs to carefully design a comprehensive strategy for CARs in order to turn the region into a source of prospective economic prospects. Nonetheless, Pakistan developed strong political ties with these nations and strengthened economic ties by urging them to participate in trade and pipeline networks.

COUNTER INDIAN INFLUENCE

Pakistan's strategy in Central Asia has been shaped by various political, economic, and geostrategic considerations. However, the fear of the influence of India in the region remains a major element in the formation of its policy. On a deeper level by engaging with Central Asian Republics, Pakistan also cultivated a strategic interest beyond merely economic and political interests. Pakistan needed regional allies to counter the influence of its arch-rival India at the regional level. Pakistan now realizes itself increasingly outflanked and encircled by India with few opportunities to enhance this strategic position (Fair, 2007) as Iran, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan are already close Indian allies. Therefore, Pakistan quested for its allies by establishing close relations with Central Asian Republics. India is always trying to limit Pakistan's objective in the region and stop CARs from using the Pakistani ports. For example, at the start of 2021, in response to the Pakistan-Uzbekistan's Trans-Afghan railway project, New Delhi suggested that the Chabahar port of Iran be part of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and asked Afghanistan and Uzbekistan to be part of this multilateral trade corridor. The INSTC is a 7,200-km corridor aimed to link India, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Europe.

In the region, India has considerable influence and is always trying its best to counter Pakistani interests through different ways and means. In contrast, Islamabad has always sought to defend against New Delhi's hegemonic aspirations. Islamabad through its strong political relations with Central Asia, it is necessary to counter Indian influence. Its Central Asian policies and relations are deeply influenced by its competition and the worries of India. It has made constant attempts to offset or neutralize India's influence in the region as the Indian factor remains an essential aspect in the formation of its strategies towards the region (Roy, 2006). Basically, the foreign policy of Pakistan has been shaped by two connected elements since its independence: fear of New Delhi and a desire to achieve a strategic balance with New Delhi. Pakistan's hostile ties with India played a key part in the improvement of its Central Asian policy too. The historical rivalry of both countries has a significant impact on their policy toward Central Asia. Both nations are playing a zero-sum game in Central Asia, where one side's gain is seen as the other's loss. Pakistan seeks a stronger presence in the CARs in order to deter India from becoming too involved. Its strategy toward the US has also always been based on the assumption that US military support will assist Islamabad in achieving balance with New Delhi. Its cordial political and strategic relations with many other friends also aim to offset New Delhi's regional power. On another level, Pakistan's aim to lead the Muslim bloc is based on the belief that doing so will increase its power in the bloc, which may then be utilized against New Delhi. Islamabad has long sought to portray itself as the only nation in the region capable of competing with India. Its strategic thinking has always been based on this principle (Agha, 2001).

Throughout the 1990s, Islamabad worked to create strategic depth in Iran, Afghanistan, and the newly independent CARs while limiting Indian influence. Pakistan has been embarrassed by its failures in the past and now adopts more modest regional aspirations (Fair, 2008). Pakistan attempted to form an Islamic bloc in the 1990s in order to increase its political weight and promote its economic gains in the region. It was viewed as a vital part of the country's long-term strategic depth, which would protect the country from a clash with its arch-rival, New Delhi. In theory, Islamabad viewed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of five Islamic countries as a good

opportunity to increase its presence in central Asia and place itself to limit Indian entree to it, effectively turning the whole area into a new theatre of strategic competition between the two countries. Islamabad anticipated that its Islamic identity and long-lasting historical and cultural links with Central Asia would provide it preferential access to CARs and help to make strong relations with them.

In the wake of India's persistent anti-Pakistan antagonism, Central Asia may become more crucial for Pakistan (Amin, 2000). Central Asia can serve as a counterbalance to the Indian threat. Though CARs must not be expected to come forward to help Pakistan in the case of war with India, close relations with them might help put some pressure on the Indian leadership as India is also keen to have close relations with CARs. Pakistan's effort to establish an economic zone in the region is largely also influenced by the Indian goal to dominate the region. India is also pursuing the goal of establishing its economic zone in the region and limiting the presence and interests of Pakistan.

Another strategic interest Pakistan cultivated in Central Asia is that the region can be more significant for Islamabad in the face of the remarkably hostile Indian stance towards Islamabad. In this respect, Islamabad has worked constantly to develop, preserve, and promote stability in Afghanistan to reach CARs and restore all kinds of ties with them. For safe and sound access of Pakistan to Central Asia, making Gwadar port a regional trade hub, ensuring its energy security and getting advantages from the massive natural sources of the region, peace in Afghanistan is very necessary. Therefore, Pakistan is working for peace.

Pakistan has so far been unable to get any cooperation from Central Asian republics for its strategic objectives against India. Its desire to achieve strategic depth in Central Asia and Afghanistan has been severely hindered by the rising security position and altering factors in the geostrategic balance after 9/11 in the region. However, if Central Asia-Pakistan connectivity projects are completely operationalized, and CARs establish trade channels via Pakistan and the Gwadar port, Pakistan's position in the region would be significantly strengthened compared to India. Pakistan, starving for foreign allies at the time, chose to cultivate the goodwill of CARs and turn them into solid regional allies to gain an advantage against India.

The rising interests of big powers in Central Asia, as well as changing US interests, have influenced Pakistan's policy. Now Pakistan is attempting to reach an economic alliance with Muslim countries such as Iran, Turkey, CARs, and Afghanistan to enhance the strategic alliance and counter Indian hegemony in the region. Pakistan's principal objective is to stabilize Afghanistan and promote Central Asian trade and commercial relationships.

FACILITATION OF ECONOMIC INTERESTS

Islamabad's core strategic objectives in the region have remained the same since the beginning, which are economic interests. It is vital to create political goodwill in order to consolidate links further to protect these interests. For Pakistan, the significance of Central Asia cannot be ignored. Therefore, Islamabad recognized the Central Asian republics soon after their independence. Islamabad has created joint economic ventures, gas pipelines, power transmission lines, and other connectivity-related projects to facilitate its economic interests in Central Asia. The country is eager to exploit its advantageous geographical position to operate as an energy and trade exportation route for Central Asia. Required infrastructures for this objective is being established, like the deep seaport of Gwadar, the Trans-Afghan railway line, the upgrading of Karakorum Highway, TAPI, CASA-1000 and many other. To facilitate trade relations, an alternative route was necessary because the insecurity in Afghanistan is a major obstacle in the way of Pakistan and Central Asia trade relations. For this purpose, the Quadrilateral Trade and Transit Agreement (QTTA) were signed between Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and China. The route has been in operation since 2006. Now Pakistan is trying to extend it to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan as well.

The current relations between Pakistan and CARs are very important as both sides can benefit substantially from each other's economic potential and strengthen their socio-economic, political, and cultural collaborations. They are blessed with much economic and political potential for each other. In terms of international trade and getting access to the international market of Central Asia the geostrategic location of Pakistan is critical. Pakistan via Afghanistan, is offering Central Asia the shortest and most cost-effective access of the region to the international market. The financial interests of CARs

can be bolstered via Pakistan and their intentional trade can be enhanced many folds if their access to the international market gets smooth. Currently, only they can trade and supply their resources to their immediate neighbours. Their economic and trade potentials need the diversification of their trade partners. The strong linkages between Pakistan and CARs will strongly facilitate and enhance future regional economic stability and mutually beneficial collaboration. For this purpose, a peaceful Afghanistan is in great interest of Pakistan because it lies at the crossroads between Pakistan and Central Asia.

To facilitate its economic interests in Central Asia, Pakistan is following different strategies. On the one hand, Pakistan wants to get advantages from the natural reservoirs of the region, especially the energy resources, and, on the other hand, wants to make them dependent on Pakistani ports to earn transit fees. Therefore, it is persistently pushing forward the idea that Pakistan is the gateway to Central Asia. As early as April 1994, this thought was expressed for the first time by then-Pakistani Premier Benazir Bhutto during her visit to Germany (Study, 1994). Moreover, the importance of Pakistan for CARs must be considered from the perspective of the whole regional pipeline politics. The government of Pakistan has developed a web of collaborative energy security networks connecting energy-hanger South Asian countries with energy-rich Central Asian countries. It is the top priority of Pakistan's foreign policy towards Central Asia.

STRENGTHEN REGIONAL INTEGRATION

Regional integration is a tool of economic transformation (Schiff and Winters, 2003). It also increases the political power of a state. The development of regional integration is a key component of Pakistan's policy toward Central Asia. Establishing strong commercial and economic ties with CARs would benefit Pakistan significantly. A fast-rising Central Asian market presents huge potential for different customer goods, textile products, and engineering goods that Pakistan produces. In the past decade, the geopolitics in the region negatively affected and limited the integration efforts in the region. Along with the geopolitical challenges, economic integration in the region is hampered by the tariff and non-tariff barrier, poor exploration of the real potentials of the region for each other, weak infrastructure, insecurity in Afghanistan, poor awareness of the benefits of integration

among the stakeholders, lack of political will and low level of investment in the integration projects. For Pakistan, economic integration with Central Asia can only materialize if security in Afghanistan and the political relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan are conducive for connectivity. Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan are a major hindrance in achieving economic integration with Central Asia as Afghanistan is located between the two regions.

Regional integration has increased the interdependence of states on one another, raised the costs of conflict and provided incentives to maintain stability. The introduction and full implementation of the numerous Pakistan-CARs ventures have a massive effect on regional integrity and solidity, ushering in a new age of regional reconstruction and development. Thus, it will create strong interdependence over each other, including Afghanistan, as all the connectivity projects are passing through its territory. This interdependency, according to the theory of Complex interdependence, helps strengthen relations among states. It is truly depicted by the growing relations between Pakistan and CARs despite several challenges they are facing in their relations. On one hand, the productive financial relations between Central Asia and Islamabad have led to growing durable bonds between them, and on the other hand, between Islamabad and Kabul, because Afghanistan is located between the two regions and all trade and energy transportation routes are passing through its territory. Geo-economic ventures are mostly focused on Pakistan and CARs. Pakistan's geopolitical location forces Central Asian governments to consider it whenever they consider South Asia. Along with the shortest sea-based trade route, Pakistan is also an ideal port for Central Asian countries to do international trade. The ports of Pakistan provide the shortest and most cost-effective cargo accommodations for them to do their exports and imports and earn profits from the international market. The increased integration will also increase the bilateral trade of Pakistan with all CARs. For further strengthening regional integration, systematic coordination between CARs and Pakistan is very important for developing trade routes and energy corridors.

STRENGTHEN ECONOMIC COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (ECO)

Islamabad has used multilateral bodies like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in Central Asia to advance its

interests. It wants to use it as a tool in strengthening its relations and regional integration. By engaging with CARs, Pakistan also wants to strengthen ECO because this organization has the potential to bring the member countries together and lead to regional integration. In 1985, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey established the Economic Cooperation Organization to foster trade, economic, technological, and political ties among them. It is the successor organization of the Regional Cooperation for Development, which was founded in 1964 and operated within the legal framework of the Treaty of Izmir which was later approved as the core Charter of the Economic Cooperation Organization. In the beginning, ECO was the principal strategy of Pakistan to achieve its objectives in Central Asia. In 1992, soon after the independence of CARs, ECO membership was expanded. The five newly established CARs, i.e., Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Azerbaijan were included in the Organization (Alam, 2004). At present, it has 10 members. The ECO's goal is to make a distinct regional market of member countries, as well as to encourage the growth of trade and business markets among Muslim states of the region. Pakistan expected that it would allow expanding its access to the huge regional market and energy resources and increase the export of its textiles, telecommunications equipments, and machinery. The Quetta Action Plan of 1993 and the Istanbul Declaration of 1993 are the blueprints for regional cooperation. The three founding member countries of the ECO have each provided 100,000 dollars to a Special fund which was used to fund feasibility studies for projects based on this plan. Also, in Almaty a communication and transportation plan was adopted in 1993 (Pomfret, 1997). All ECO members, including Pakistan and the CARs, have a similar culture and history. They can make better use of the ECO platform, as well as their present infrastructure, historical ties, and trade links to solve their disagreements and strengthen their financial and political ties. These 10 Muslim republics have the capability to become the biggest Muslim common market in the world and an influential political entity in international politics.

The ECO agreement on border cooperation was one of Pakistan's first initiatives to involve Central Asian nations by creating multilateral cooperation in the region. During the early post-Soviet period, ECO was seen as the path of Pakistan to Central Asia.

Islamabad had better success in this manner by lobbying for CARs inclusion in ECO. The heads of member states summit declared at the Ashkhabad summit in 1992 that trade is one of the main elements of their relationships and that they will try to enhance trade volume and execute mutual investing plans.

Despite several challenges and hurdles, the ECO has made some progress toward regional economic integration. Through accords such as the Preferential Trade Agreement and substantial reductions in import duties on their exports, ECO member countries are moving toward trade liberalization. In this regard, on July 17, 2003, the Economic Cooperation Organization Trade Agreement (ECOTA) was inked in Islamabad. At a conference in March 2009, member countries pledged to establish the ECO region as a free trade zone by 2015. The three founding members of the ECO also established the Trade and Development Bank on August 3, 2005, which was a significant development. The bank focuses on providing affordable finance for developmental projects with reasonable repayment terms. It is a fact that ECO has greater potential for regional integration which will be very helpful in fulfilling Islamabad's interests in CARs. ECO also serves as a common forum for boosting regional economic activities. For the strengthening of economic and trade relations, the Protocol on Preferential Tariffs was inked by the Economic Cooperation Organization member countries at the start of the year 1991. Signatory countries decided to grant a 10% tariff decrease on a limited number of goods. However, still, the trade volume in the ECO framework remained relatively high. The organization needs to provide significant results but only lip service. The organization should be utilized to develop such policy and programs which achieves practical results. If the signed Trade and Development Bank Trade Agreement and Transit Transport Agreement adopted by the ECO were implemented, it would be a successful regional organization (Khwaja, 2004).

Pakistan has yet to make significant progress in developing notable commercial and trade links with Central Asia. Recently, a very good opportunity has been created, which is very helpful in improving regional integration and increasing trade relations. On December 22, 2021, the Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) freight train service was resumed among the three members of ECO after several years of suspension. It was inaugurated at Margalla railway station, Islamabad,

Pakistan. Ambassadors of Turkey, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan were also present on the occasion (Yasin, 2021). It will help further regional integration and can link with the trans-Afghan railway and extend it to Central Asian countries. By optimizing economic efficiency and lowering the cost of conducting business, the freight train service can play a crucial role in developing the trade and economic relations and lives of people of ECO member countries. The restoration of operations of the ITI freight train has reassured that regional connectivity is one of the most important foundations of Islamabad's trade strategy.

ECO has yet to prove as effective as it was expected in terms of enhancing Pakistan's relations with CARs. This is largely due to intense competition inside the organization between Turkey and Iran; both seek increasing dominance in Central Asia. There are many hurdles in the way of strengthening ECO. The divergence between Pakistan and Iran and Turkey and Iran also affected its performance. Competition among member countries is a major hurdle to the success of ECO. The struggle for influence between Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran has hampered its existence. Tehran and Islamabad have a long history of strong ties with Central Asia, which may be classified as a mix of collaboration and competition. Iran and Pakistan have divergent viewpoints on the Afghan issue also. These are key hurdles in the way of ECO smooth working. It was formed several decades ago, but due to some underlying issues still it is weak and unsuccessful in achieving its determined objectives. It has power symmetry, but it has yet to play a major role due to the member countries' lack of seriousness and professionalism, as well as turmoil in Afghanistan and the United States sanctions against Tehran. Unfortunately, bloodshed and armed conflicts in Afghanistan constitute a serious hindrance to regional integration in the two regions. Without peace in this war-torn country, it is impossible to anticipate connectivity, stability, and peace in the region. In ECO, there is also a need for more political will and commitment to speed up the regionalism process. Due to instability in Afghanistan, big projects like CASA-1000 and the TAPI gas pipeline are still waiting to materialize. The chances for peace in the whole region will remain blurred if Afghanistan continues to be conflicted and violent. Peace in this country is critical for the continuation and completion of projects like TAPI, TAP-500 CASA-1000, and improved trade relationships between Pakistan and Central Asia.

The lack of implementation of projects planned by the ECO is also one of the main causes of the weakness of the organization. Due to a lack of resources and political unity, ECO's ambitions for regional cooperation cannot be executed successfully. For example, the member countries had pledged the creation of four institutions in the region: a Trade and Development Bank, Reinsurance Company, an ECO Shipping Company, and an ECO Airline. The ECO Reinsurance Company is supposed to be located in Pakistan, while the Trade and Development Bank is supposed to be based in Istanbul. The 3rd ECO Summit held in March 1995 in Islamabad approved contracts on all these four regional institutions, although they have yet to be executed. Similarly, the ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) came into effect in 2008 but was not implemented after 13 years. The Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA), ratified by only nine ECO countries, has a similar case.

To strengthen the function of ECO, it requires a strong leader who can bring members together and link them in a mutually beneficial manner; otherwise, like its predecessor RCD, it would also fade into the background. Another factor undermining ECO is that Central Asian Republics first turned to the West for Political, economic, and security help but now again returned to Russia. They have no big hopes for ECO. For example, recently, at the start of 2022, when violent protests broke out in Kazakhstan against the rising fuel prices, the government called Russian troops for help.

The Shanghai Five Initiative of 1996, which later led to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001, also undermined Pakistan's strategic position because it had weakened the ECO's relevance for CARs, while the ECO was Pakistan's principal instrument for advancing its interests in Central Asia. Its goal has remained focused on promoting shared financial interests, building strategic and political trust among members, and fighting religious extremism. The establishment of SCO had, to some extent, limited Pakistan's Central Asian ambitions, as it has increased the access and involvement of other regional actors in the affairs of the region. As a result, countries like Pakistan, India, Iran, and Afghanistan, among others, have shown their interest in becoming members of this organization. Pakistan and India gained membership, but the other two must be successful.

ECO can learn many lessons from the European Union, which is the most successful example of regionalism. In the EU, intra-regional trade accounts for 40% of total trade (Ahmar, 2021), but in the ECO, intra-regional trade is quite low despite great trade potential. In 2020, the intra-ECO trade recorded 49.8 billion dollars which is about 7.5% of the total ECO members global trade (ECO Trade Statistics). It shows that intra-regional trade is very low. The ECO countries need to be more and more economically and politically integrated. A higher level of market integration, improved transportation, improved energy security, broader communication and information technology, modest connectivity among its people, further investment, and reduction of financial risks and vulnerabilities are all areas where economic integration can provide significant benefits to countries and their people. Strong trade, economic, and financial relations can go a long way toward reducing skepticism and mistrust among the governments of the regional countries. Furthermore, successful trade and increased economic integration will aid in the process of sustainable development, resulting in a variety of job and business prospects. That is especially the case in Europe, where trade and economic operations in the region not only successfully managed disputes but also reduced dissatisfaction and anxiety among people, particularly youth. Regional cooperation, connectivity and integration pay off not just in terms of development and peace but also in increased per capita income, Gross Domestic product, and improved quality of life. The necessity of the hour for ECO is to share its knowledge, experience, and capabilities in order to create a better future. Climate change, underdevelopment, drugs, drug proliferation, extremism, violence, and terrorism are among the concerns that member nations are dealing with. Such issues can only be adequately dealt with if the leadership has the political will to stop the elements that seek to maintain the region backward and unstable.

Pakistan's policy towards its neighbours and extended peripheral regions are broadly based on the arguments of the regionalism theory of international relations. Islamabad also appears to have seen the ECO's geographical composition as a means of its strategic depth policy of containing the Indian rise as a regional power. ECO also serves as a venue for member nations to resolve regional concerns and cooperate peacefully.

CONCLUSION

Central Asia is politically very important for Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan has projected many political interests in the region since 1991. The emergence of CARs has produced an opportunity for the peripheral and extended peripheral countries to expand their orbit of friends and partners. To take maximum benefits from the opportunity, Pakistan successfully advocated for the CARs to join the Economic Cooperation Organization in 1992. It was the first political venture and success of Pakistan in the region. The political interests of Pakistan in Central Asia are to establish friendly relations with CARs, make CARs its allies in regional and global affairs, counter Indian influence in regional affairs, facilitate its economic relations through proactive political engagement, strengthen regional integration to utilize the opportunities for its national interests, and better utilize the platforms of ECO and SCO. Progress and prosperity in both regions need collaborative intra-regional and inter-regional cooperation, optimum use of resources, and the exploration of new transit and commerce routes.

The political objectives of Pakistan in the region are very important for its national interests. Unfortunately, due to a couple of reasons like the failure of ECO, the Afghan imbroglio, terrorism and extremism in the region, a strong influence of India in the region, hurdles in the way of connectivity of Pakistan with Central Asia, and many other issues have created many hurdles in the way of Pakistan to fulfill its political interests in Central Asia. In order to transform the obstacles into possibilities, the policymakers of Pakistan must develop a comprehensive strategy for Central Asia. Given their strong historical and cultural ties and potential for each other, they should optimize the opportunities of working together in the areas of their mutual interests.

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