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Abstract

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Keywords: Transit Corridors, Regional Security, Economic Interdependence, Smuggling Networks, APTTA, Afghanistan–Pakistan Relations.

Authors:

Nimra Khalil: Researcher, BS Mass Communication, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

Qasim Ali Shah: (Corresponding Author)
PhD, COMSATS University, Abbottabad, KP, Pakistan.
(Email: drqasimalishah76@gmail.com)

Farwa Imtiaz: Mphil Scholar, Department of Peace And Conflict Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

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Authors:

Nimra Khalil: Researcher, BS Mass Communication, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

Qasim Ali Shah: (Corresponding Author)
PhD, COMSATS University, Abbottabad, KP, Pakistan.
(Email: drqasimalishah76@gmail.com)

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This paper looks into the dependence of Afghanistan on Pakistan as the main transit route and how the interdependency of trade cuts across the rising transboundary security issues. Being a landlocked country, Afghanistan relies on the ports of Pakistan, as its location is superior, its infrastructure better, and the cost is lower than in Iran or Central Asia. The study provides an analytical examination of geography, transit law, and Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) to show that Pakistan has in the past given broader economic facilitation to Afghanistan, but relations have been under strain due to chronic problems such as smuggling, diversion of transit goods and militant activity. Recent anti-smuggling crackdowns and security-related restrictions enforced by Pakistan are thus attempts to reduce abuse, not legitimate trade. It is concluded in the paper that durable transit collaboration demands that Afghanistan responds to Pakistan's security issues.

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Introduction

The relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is a multilayered one, where economic interdependence is overlapped by the security problems that have been observed to be chronic (Khan et al., 2025). Afghanistan is a landlocked nation situated in the South-Central part of the Asian continent, and as an open economy, it depends on Pakistan to access the global routes via the sea (Atif, 2024). Pakistan has been traditionally the main access of Afghanistan to the external markets through Karachi and Port Qasim, which are unmatched geographically and in terms of infrastructure and cost effectiveness (Samad & Ahmed, 2011). These corridors have historically supported the economy of Afghanistan, with nearly the entire worth of goods being transferred through them despite occasional political strain. At the same time, Pakistan is experiencing growing security risks posed by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and similar groups based in the territory of Afghanistan since the Taliban coup of 2021 (Kaleem & Iqbal, 2023). It is this new wave of terrorism that has put a strain on bilateral relations and heightened demand among the Pakistani government on the Taliban to make tangible commitments in ensuring that the Afghan soil is not used to attack Pakistan (Associated Press of Pakistan, 2025). The last series of talks between the two countries, such as the Istanbul talks brokered by Qatar and Turkey, is testimony to the fact that transit collaboration cannot be decoupled from border security (Ranjha, 2025).

The paper takes an analytical approach and believes that Pakistan's stand is based on international law, responsibility of the region, and the right of self-defense. The use of transit concessions, the number of refugees, and the economic facilitation of Pakistan over the decades prove its goodwill, and its security requirements are based on the principles of universal state sovereignty. The subsequent parts give a literature-like background and proceed to a detailed analysis of geography, trade, law, APTTA, smuggling, and comparison routes.

Borders and Neighboring States

The economic choices of Afghanistan are mostly shaped by its geography. Afghanistan lacks a coastline, and the mountainous country (consisting of rugged mountains, the Hindu Kush) is bordered by deserts in the south and the plains in the north, which means that the country is the ninth-largest landlocked nation in the world (Porter and Lye, 2007). This status forces Afghanistan to rely on transit routes through neighboring states for its imports and exports. Without direct sea access, Afghan traders must send goods overland to reach ports in Pakistan or Iran, or via air, which is far costlier (Rahim, 2018). Landlocked states like Afghanistan are recognized in international law as deserving special facilitation for transit.

Afghanistan is ringed by six countries: Pakistan to the east and south, Iran to the west, Turkmenistan to the northwest, Uzbekistan to the north, Tajikistan to the northeast, and a tiny frontier with China at the far northeast (Syzdykova et al., 2020). The approximate border lengths are Pakistan ~2,670 km, Iran ~921 km, Tajikistan ~1,357 km, Turkmenistan ~804 km, Uzbekistan ~144 km, and China ~91 km (World Factbook, 2022). These borders correspond to traditional transit routes: Pakistan's border (the longest) runs along the historically porous Durand Line and is the gateway to the Indian Ocean; Iran's border connects Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf; the Central Asian borders link to rail networks of the former Soviet Union; and the narrow Chinese Wakhan Corridor (only ~76–92 km long) is remote and has no active road crossing (Pariona, 2018). For each neighbor, there are key crossing points and trade routes:

Pakistan: The main crossings are Torkham (Khyber Pass, connecting Kabul–Jalalabad to Peshawar) and Chaman (Spin Boldak, linking Kandahar to Quetta). These two are "the backbone of Afghanistan's commercial lifelines", handling the bulk of Afghan transit trade. A newer route via Ghulam Khan (in Pakistan's tribal north) has also opened in recent years (Pakistan Intermodal Limited, 2023). Through Pakistan, Afghan goods reach the seaports of Karachi and Port Qasim, and under APTTA, Afghan exports can even go by road to the Wagah border with India (UNCTAD, 2011). No alternative provides a comparably short distance to a deep-water port: Pakistani ports are roughly 1,200–1,500 km from Kabul, versus over 2,000 km if via Iran's Bandar Abbas or much more via Central Asia. Consequently, "few alternatives can match Pakistan's proximity or port infrastructure," as experts note (Tanoli, n.d.).

Iran: Major crossings include Islam Qala (Herat province to Iran's Dogharoun) and Zaranj (Nimroz province to Milak, leading onwards to Iran's Chabahar port). Iran has actively promoted Chabahar as an option for Afghan transit, even offering steep tariff discounts to Afghan traders (Yawar & Shahid, 2025). However, the distance from Kabul to Chabahar (~1,800 km) is greater, and U.S. sanctions on Iran have posed banking and insurance hurdles. Iran's routes are useful for western Afghanistan (Herat region) and provide a critical outlet whenever Pakistan's routes are closed, but they entail longer transit times and higher costs on average (Tariq, 2025).

Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan)

During recent tensions with Pakistan, Afghanistan has tried to expand trade northward. Key crossings are Torghundi to Turkmenistan (connecting to a rail line toward Turkmenbashi port on the Caspian Sea), Hairatan to Uzbekistan (a Soviet-built rail bridge to Termez), and Sher Khan Bandar to Tajikistan (*Afghanistan and Turkmenistan Sign $5 Million Agreement to Develop Torghundi Port*, 2025). Trade with the five Central Asian republics has grown, reaching about $1.7 billion total, but this is still modest (Najibullah, 2025). These routes require long overland transits to reach any seaport (e.g., via Russia or the Black Sea) and suffer from infrastructure gaps and high tariffs (Dawn, 2025; Najibullah, 2025). One expert observes that for Afghanistan to make northern routes viable, it would need to slash tariffs and invest in logistics, difficult for Kabul given its fiscal constraints (Najibullah, 2025). Central Asian corridors are thus supplementary rather than primary, and they themselves depend on stable regional politics.

China: Afghanistan's border with China is a sheer mountain interface in the Wakhan Corridor with no road connectivity. There is talk of future road or rail links, but presently, no trade flows through the Afghanistan–China border. Any Chinese trade with Afghanistan is conducted via Pakistan or Central Asia (Sarbiland & Stanikzai, 2024).

Pakistan's east-south route remains Afghanistan's most vital trade artery. Even Taliban officials privately admit that Pakistan offers the "shortest and cheapest route to seaports as well as India" (Yawar & Shahid, 2025). As a Taliban-era Chamber of Commerce head, Azarakhsh Hafizi, put it: "Afghanistan's shortest and cheapest route to seaports…is through Pakistan", and shifting away means significantly "higher transport costs, longer transit times, and increased risks" (Rehman, 2025).

Afghanistan's Trade Volume and Partners

Afghanistan's total trade (imports + exports) is relatively small in global terms but crucial for its economy (trade was about 67% of GDP in 2023) (*Afghanistan Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners | the Observatory of Economic Complexity*, n.d.). In 2024, Afghanistan imported an estimated $10.8 billion in goods while exporting around $1.9 billion, running a huge trade deficit (*Afghanistan's Trade Volume Surpasses 12 Bln USD in 2024*, n.d.). Major imports include food, fuel, machinery, and textiles; key exports include agricultural products (fruits, nuts), minerals (like coal), and traditional crafts (carpets). Pakistan historically was Afghanistan's largest trading partner (*Kabul Bilateral Trade*, n.d.). To illustrate, bilateral trade was at its highest of approximately 5 billion a year at one time at around 2011 (Raza, 2022). The share in Pakistan has been fluctuating in the past few years as a result of ups and downs in politics. As of 2024, Afghanistan had exported billion dollars in trade to Pakistan (this is partially because Pakistan tightened border controls and Iran offered competition) but even then, Pakistan was the largest recipient of Afghan exports (around 45 percent of Afghan exports in 2024 were to Pakistan) (*Pakistan-Afghanistan Bilateral Trade & Afghanistan's Trade with Other Regional Countries | Pakistan Business Council*, n.d.). Iran has expanded to become the largest import supplier (approximately 30 percent of the Afghan imports in 2024) on the import side because of lower fuel costs and alternative routes in times of border closures in Pakistan (Ani, 2025). Other prominent partners are the United Arab Emirates (in terms of goods and a trading place), China, India (particularly Afghan exports such as dried fruits), and the Central Asian states. Overall, however, Afghanistan's "fastest and most affordable" access to international markets remains through Pakistan.

Barcelona Convention, APTTA, and Pakistan's Transit Route

The plight of landlocked states has long been known to international law. A League of Nations treaty of 1921, the Barcelona Convention and Statute on Freedom of Transit (still in force) established some principles. It states that landlocked countries must be free to transit transit states on routes that are deemed to be international transit routes without being discriminated against. It is worth noting that Article 2 supports the sovereignty of every state in the arrangement of transit on its ground, whereas Article 3 prohibits transit states from collecting any fees exceeding the amounts required to meet administrative expenses (Jamal, 2020). Importantly, Article 5 also enables a state to bar the flow of certain goods due to reasons of security, and Article 7 also enables that transit should be blocked in a national emergency (D. F. Jamal, 2020). The Barcelona Statute, in a nutshell, balances state sovereignty and security with freedom of transit (Jamal, 2020). These concepts were strengthened in subsequent treaties: GATT 1947 (since replaced by WTO rules) has Article V on freedom of transit, and the New York Convention on Transit Trade of Land-locked States of 1965 (which recited the right of landlocked states to access to the sea) further endorsed the right of access to the sea. Pakistan and Afghanistan also have WTO transit obligations, but since Afghanistan joined the WTO in 2016, both countries have WTO transit obligations (Analytical Index of the GATT, n.d.). All these norms substantiate the case of Afghanistan to have reasonable transit access. Pakistan, for its part, has generally upheld these principles by providing Afghan traders access to its ports for decades. At the same time, international law clearly allows Pakistan to regulate transit for legitimate objectives like safety, customs control, and security. Pakistan's recent actions (e.g., scanning transit cargo, imposing tracking devices, or temporarily halting flows due to security threats) fall within the sovereign exceptions noted above, provided they are applied in good faith and without discrimination.

The Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA, 2010)

Bilaterally, the rules of the road are defined by APTTA. Signed in October 2010 and in force from February 2011, APTTA modernized a prior 1965 treaty (Paswan, 2010). Under APTTA's provisions, "Afghan trucks are allowed to carry Afghan transit export cargo to Pakistani ports and to the Indian border (Wagah)", something previously not permitted. It expanded the number of designated routes and border crossings, and crucially, it opened additional Pakistani seaports (beyond Karachi) for Afghan use (Nawaz, 2023). For example, Gwadar Port was later included as a transit port. APTTA also enabled Afghan trucks to carry goods into Pakistan (under bond) and backhaul Pakistani exports to Afghanistan, simplifying logistics (Paswan, 2010). From Afghanistan's perspective, APTTA's advantages are substantial: it grants duty-free transit of Afghan imports through Pakistan (Afghanistan does not pay Pakistani import tariffs on goods in transit); it provides port access and warehousing at Karachi and Qasim; it allows use of Pakistan's road and rail network without quantitative restrictions; and it facilitates Afghan exports by land to India (even though Indian exports cannot go to Afghanistan via Pakistan, a one-way concession Pakistan maintained for security reasons) (Rehman, 2025). In short, Pakistan agreed to act as a conduit for Afghan trade with minimal charges, aligned with international best practices for transit. The UN Conference on Trade and Development hailed APTTA as implementing long-standing recommendations for regional transit cooperation. For Pakistan, a motivation was reciprocity. APTTA also envisages Pakistan accessing Central Asian markets via Afghan territory (though insecurity has so far limited this).

Trade and Transit under APTTA

In the early 2010s, after APTTA, bilateral commerce flourished. Pakistan was Afghanistan's top supplier for many goods (cement, wheat, produce, etc.), exporting $1.18 billion to Afghanistan in 2019 (Abraze, 2022). Afghan exports to Pakistan (fruits, coal, licorice, etc.) were about $544 million in 2019 (Research Society of International Law, 2023). Total two-way trade consistently exceeded $2 billion until around 2015. Moreover, a significant portion of Afghanistan's overall imports (historically between 30–50%) transited through Pakistan's ports (Arooj et al., 2022). Transit trade volume provides another lens: For example, in fiscal year 2011–12, tens of thousands of Afghan transit containers moved through Karachi. By one account, transit trade via Pakistan reached $7.5 billion in goods value at its peak (Mohammadi, 2025). This figure then notably declined in subsequent years due to factors discussed below (smuggling crackdowns and alternate routes). Nevertheless, until recently, more than half of the imports of Afghanistan in terms of value were through Pakistan. The exports of Pakistan to Afghanistan, even in 2024, recovered almost to the level of 1.5 billion dollars, which also indicates long-term interdependence (TRADING ECONOMICS, n.d.). The positive economic impact of APTTA on Afghanistan is clear: it reduces transport expenses and time significantly for the Afghan merchants. In another study by the World Bank, it was observed that extra traffic via Karachi under APTTA generates economies of scale, which reduces freight rates charged to Afghanistan (Owais et al., 2018). As a matter of fact, transit corridors in Pakistan have served as the economic lifeline of Afghanistan to international trade.

Pakistan's Legal Basis to Regulate Transit

Generally, Pakistan orthodoxly respects its APTTA and international obligations, but it still has the right to regulate or block transit in some circumstances. In Pakistan, the customs law (and APTTA protocols) gives powers to the authorities to investigate transit goods and make sure that they are not diverted into the market of Pakistan. In case the Afghan trucks or importers breach the treaty (such as smuggling goods to Pakistan, which are supposed to reach Afghanistan), Pakistan can legally take action. Article 5 of the Barcelona Convention includes provisions that adjust security as a reason to bar certain goods in Pakistan (Jamal, 2020). Further, in APTTA, the prohibitions and restrictions are provided separately: any party is allowed to take temporary restrictions in the event of the misuse of the transit facility or to defend the morals or safety of the population (Jamal, 2020). Thus, in case there are security threats (e.g., evidence that militants are using transit routes to transfer weapons or funds), then Pakistan may have the right to suspend transit until the problem is resolved. Likewise, smuggling or even fraud on customs may be so widespread that Pakistan may unilaterally increase restrictions or even suspend transit of some commodities. In recent years, Pakistan has invoked these rights. As an illustration, when there were consistent claims that the transit imports of goods into Afghanistan were getting smuggled back into Pakistan, crippling Pakistani business and tax revenues, Pakistan established tougher terms of monitoring. Later in 2023, with a severe balance of payment crisis, Islamabad initiated a massive anti-smuggling crackdown, which involved real-time monitoring of transit trucks, physical escorts, and interdictions that were intelligence-led. The outcome was quite dramatic: Afghan transit trade through Pakistan has decreased in value by 84% as a result of these actions. In particular, transit goods fell to $1.2 billion in the year after the crackdown as compared to the previous year (7.48 billion) (PT Profit, 2025). This, according to the Pakistani authorities, was not a result of strangling Afghanistan trade in particular, but rather done to destroy fake transit that was supplying the black market in Pakistan, and they claimed that real Afghan freight would go on undetected, but fake transit that was to be sold to Pakistani smuggling networks was being strangled. Law-wise, the actions of Pakistan were a right to preclude unlawful use of the transit regime, as was implicit in any treaty.

Pakistan–Afghanistan Trade Figures, APTTA Benefits, and Smuggling Issues:

Boom and Decline of Bilateral Trade

As noted, Pakistan was once Afghanistan's largest trading partner, but bilateral trade has been volatile. After peaking around 2011, trade declined to roughly $1–1.5 billion in recent years. Pakistani exports to Afghanistan (including flour, processed foods, medicines, and construction materials) have partly been replaced by Iranian and Central Asian suppliers (Price et al., 2019). Conversely, Pakistan now sources less coal from Afghanistan than it did immediately post-2021 (due to new tariffs and a return to other suppliers), and despite this decline, Pakistan still sent over $1 billion in official exports to Afghanistan in 2024 and bought about $524 million in Afghan goods ("Pakistan Halts Coal & Soapstone Imports from Afghanistan," 2025). The APTTA transit facility continues to underpin a larger trade relationship that includes informal cross-border commerce and re-exports. One tangible benefit for Afghanistan under APTTA and earlier arrangements has been the ability to import critical commodities through Pakistan without import duties. For example, ATTA 1965 explicitly allowed duty-free imports via Karachi for Afghanistan, enabling Afghan markets to enjoy lower prices (at the cost of some leakage into Pakistan) (Nasir et al., 2020). This has saved Afghan consumers and businesses on logistics expenses and time. Afghan officials acknowledge that Pakistan's ports are more efficient and closer to them than alternatives. Additionally, Pakistan has provided warehousing and transit storage facilities for Afghan transit goods in its port areas, often rent-free for initial periods, and permits Afghan traders to nominate bonded carriers to transport goods (Nawaz, 2023). All these are significant facilitations that a landlocked economy requires. By one estimate, using Karachi reduces the transit distance for Afghan goods by hundreds of kilometers and cuts transit costs by 30–50% compared to using Iranian routes (Yawar & Shahid, 2025). Afghanistan has "economically benefited" through such lower transport costs and quicker access to global supply chains, which in turn support Afghan domestic consumption and exports.

Afghan Smuggling and Pakistan's Crackdowns

A persistent thorn in the side of transit trade has been smuggling and misuse of facilities. Under the cover of APTTA, some traders would import high-tariff goods (electronics, luxury items, cigarettes, etc.) ostensibly for Afghanistan, then divert them into Pakistani markets, evading duties. Pakistan complains that "a large volume of duty-free Afghan transit imports is smuggled back" into Pakistan, "undercutting domestic manufacturers, reducing tax revenue and feeding an extensive illicit economy" (Amjad, 2025). Indeed, items with little actual demand in Afghanistan (like expensive cellphones or certain luxury foods in large quantities) raised suspicions that transit was being misused. This transit leakage cost Pakistan's exchequer hundreds of millions of dollars in lost taxes and also fostered organized crime networks. Furthermore, Pakistani officials link smuggling routes with militant trafficking, noting "cross-border smuggling networks often overlap with militant groups," exacerbating security problems (Ahmed et al., 2025).

In response, Pakistan periodically imposed stricter regimes. Recent examples include: requiring all Afghan transit containers to be fitted with GPS trackers; increasing customs spot-checks; banning certain goods from transit (like Indian-origin products or items prone to smuggling such as tires and tea at various times); and, in September 2023, a high-profile campaign to seize smuggled goods and currency along the western border (Nawaz, 2023). The impact on Afghanistan from these crackdowns has been mixed. In the short term, Afghan traders have faced delays and higher costs. When Pakistan's crackdown in late 2023 caused transit volume to plummet by over 60% year-on-year, Afghanistan's importers had to either pay more through Iran or see goods stuck at Karachi (Nawaz, 2023). Afghan officials estimated major losses, the Taliban commerce ministry cited losses of $80–100 million in duties and fees when transit slowed, and Afghan markets experienced price increases for scarce commodities (fuel, flour) when Pakistani routes were closed ("Afghanistan Seeks to Cut Economic Dependence on Pakistan," 2025).

However, much of what was curtailed might have been gray-market trade benefiting smuggling syndicates more than the Afghan economy. Afghan businesses that were re-exporting to Pakistan illegally obviously lost out, and Kabul's government saw reduced transit trade revenue. One report noted Afghanistan's transit trade "forward cargo" (imports into Afghanistan) fell from $2.28 billion to $809 million in a comparable period, indicating a sharp contraction in available goods in Afghan markets via Pakistan (Khan, 2025). This must have been painful to Afghan consumers (temporary scarcities) and customs revenues. The anti-smuggling initiative in Pakistan, therefore, intended to safeguard its economy, but Afghanistan was a collateral victim. Afghanistan may have suffered hundreds of millions of dollars in informal re-export earnings lost and had to find more expensive ways of importing some of its goods. On the political side, Taliban rulers denounced such actions as Pakistan applying trade as a political instrument. When viewed through the prism of Pakistan, however, such crackdowns are an act of lawful action by Pakistan to control transit and to put down unchecked abuse that was crippling its economy. It also arguably compels Afghanistan to grow in building formal trade (with documentation and duty) instead of using quasi-smuggling to conduct business.

Pakistan's Routes vs. Others:

Although Kabul talks of alternatives, statistics always indicate that the transit routes of Pakistan have a comparative advantage over Afghanistan.

Distance to Seaports: Karachi port lies approximately 500km in relation to the Afghanistan border (Chaman or Torkham) and approximately 1,000km from the major Afghanistan cities; Chabahar port in Iran is more than 1800 km from Kabul, and the routes through central Asia involve crossing various countries before reaching any ocean (Haq, n.d.). The shorter the distance, the faster the delivery: Karachi-based trucks, according to Pakistani officials, can get to Afghanistan within three days, which cannot be compared to any other roads.

Price: Pakistani routes enjoy economies of scale and large volumes of traffic (Pakistan has many shipping lines calling Karachi). The costs will increase by 30-50 percent because of longer transit and the various tariffs, according to the testimony of one Afghan trader, who explained that diversion via Iran or Central Asia would raise the costs (PT Profit, 2025). Actually, this was witnessed when Afghanistan attempted to divert part of the business into the North. Traders lamented that Central Asian charges and duties made numerous exports (such as fruits) unprofitable because of the additional overhead.

Infrastructure: Pakistan's port infrastructure and road network (e.g., the Karachi–Peshawar highway) are comparatively well-developed. While Iran has decent roads to the Afghan border, Central Asian rail links are still developing, and border facilities there are smaller in scale. Political

Risk: Pakistan's political relationship with Afghanistan is fraught, but the two countries have a long history of trade integration. By contrast, routes through Iran face the uncertainty of international sanctions and Iran–Taliban frictions (recently over water rights and refugees). Central Asian routes depend on stable Afghan relations with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, etc., and those countries' capacity is limited (they themselves are landlocked or have small ports on the Caspian). Moreover, during Pakistan's border closure in 2023, Afghan exports diverted north suffered delays and spoilage, as perishable goods struggled with the longer journey ("Reopen Afghan Border Demand Traders as Goods Rot at Checkpoints," 2025).

Even the Taliban's own ministers admit Pakistan's route is crucial. Taliban commerce minister Azizi acknowledged Pakistan is still the "shortest, cheapest route to seaports", despite efforts to use Iran and Central Asia ("Afghanistan Seeks to Cut Economic Dependence on Pakistan," 2025). Thus, from a pro-Pakistan viewpoint, while Afghanistan might be able to diversify for resilience, Pakistan's transit offering remains indispensable. Indeed, Pakistan often argues that its restrictions are intended not to punish Afghans but to prevent misuse and that genuine Afghan trade is always welcome to pass freely. The recent Afghan turn to Iran's Chabahar port, facilitated by Indian investment, has slightly reduced dependency on Karachi. Yet, even as of late 2025, Afghan officials conceded that Pakistan is still the fastest route to the sea and that Pakistani exports to Afghanistan remain significant (Yawar & Shahid, 2025). Geography and economics thus align in Pakistan's favor, reinforcing the argument that Pakistan's cooperation is vital for Afghanistan's prosperity.

Impact of Afghanistan's Geo-Economics Recalibration and Quest for Alternate Trade Corridors

The recent effort of repositioning Afghanistan's regional geo-economics and becoming less reliant on Pakistan under the Taliban regime has created a dynamic discussion concerning whether alternative trade routes are possible or not. Taliban leaders frequently refer to the symbol that Afghanistan is the "Heartland of Asia", the echo of earlier Silk Road figmentations. However, the caravan routes are no longer a matter of modern trade and power projection (Seland, 2018). Modern international business requires maritime bottlenecks, online supply chains, insurance-based capital, and industrial mass scale, and in such areas, Afghanistan, as a landlocked and industrial non-optimum and politically isolated state, has limited strategic influence. Notwithstanding the rhetorical claims, Afghanistan is structurally reliant on the external transit trade routes, particularly the ones through Pakistan.

The 2025 appeal by the deputy prime minister, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, to the Afghan traders to abandon Pakistan and use Iranian or Central Asian passages is more of a political gesture, but it does not make economic sense. Redistribution of trade routes is an expensive exercise in terms of logistics, politics, and money (Ois et al., 2010). Pakistan is the shortest and quickest route to the sea; the goods, shipped by Karachi, take about 3–4 days, shipments by Iran take about 6–8 days, and any through Central Asia can take much longer. The distance disparities are also well pronounced, where the city of Kandahar and Helmand are only 150 to 300 km from Chaman to Spin Boldak and 1200 to 1300 km from Zaranj to Delaram, whereas the cities of Balkh are hundreds of kilometers closer to Torkham than to the Islam Qala of Iran (Rana, 2025). These geographic facts will become felt costs as rerouting costs are up 30-50 per transport because it takes 45-60 days through Iran, the same distance would have taken 22-25 days by Karachi, and the cost per container is USD 2,000-2,500 extra (Rana, 2025).

The dependence of Afghanistan on perishables is another limitation to alternatives. At about 83 percent, a large part of the Afghan exports are agricultural perishables, requiring short, cost-effective routes; any lag of time leads to spoilage and loss of competitiveness in the market. It also impacts the trade with India because the Attari Wagah border has previously served 90 percent of trade between India and Afghanistan, and bypassing Pakistan would add 15-20 percent to the cost, which requires additional subsidies by India (Brar, 2025).

Bending towards Iran presents itself with its own risks as well. Socio-cultural prejudice and strategic mistrust of the Afghans, both traditional and modern Iran, gravitated towards one another, manifesting in moments of discriminatory treatment, mass deportation (3,000 Afghans a day), and frequent limitation of the freedom of movement of its nationals, particularly during periods of crisis in the region. Numerous disagreements regarding the Helmand River, the presence of ISIS-K, and border-related issues are another difficulty that makes collaboration more challenging. The reliance on Iranian routes also increases the U.S leverage: the Chabahar access is based on the six-month waiver of U.S. sanctions, and Afghanistan trades face American control regulation (Yusuf, 2025). There is a high banking risk, insurance restrictions preventing dollar payments, and the exposure of second-order sanctions to Afghanistan companies, a situation that does not favour economic predictability in Kabul.

The change in trade location also carries with it political implications in the country. Kandahar, Kabul, Nangarhar, and Paktia, as the eastern and southeastern provinces of Afghanistan, also enjoyed the advantage of being close to Pakistan because the region has long consolidated elite patronization networks and sources of revenue. Regions of the West and North, which are more distant along arteries, have fallen behind. Massive rerouting to Iran or CARs would slowly redistribute power from the eastern Pashtun elites and could reduce their access to resources and change internal Taliban structures. Friction could emanate within the regime due to such internal political realignment.

On the other hand, there are other long-term consequences that could be beneficial to Pakistan. The restrictions on the cross-border trade can curtail duty-free Afghan imports into Pakistani markets, illegally diverted, minimize smuggling, narcotics, illicit weapons, and backflow of Afghan transit goods, which are estimated to cost Pakistan approximately Rs 3.4 trillion a year of illicit trade and 1 trillion of transit leakage (Rana, 2025). The fact that some of the routes are closed increases the inward economic orientation of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which makes it more integrated with Punjab and Sindh and disperses a sense of national harmony. At the strategic level, Pakistan is intensifying its bypassing of Afghanistan by cultivating options with China using emerging Pakistan-China-Central Asia corridors, the Gwadar-China-Tajikistan route, extensions of the TIR transport network, and the Karachi-China-Kazakhstan-Russia overland rail and road projects. All this is placing Pakistan in a strategic position to ensure that it stays connected with the rest of the region without feeling a victim to the political instability of Afghanistan.

In general, although Taliban rhetoric and periodic tensions exist, Afghanistan does not have any viable options that would be as geographically close to Pakistan, as port efficient, and cost-effective in comparison. As lived examples confirm, any attempt by Afghanistan to avoid Pakistan (e.g., the conflicts of 1949-1962) tended to create a lapse in time, defeat, and subsequent switching to the Pakistani ways. Therefore, Kabul might pursue diversification to signify political adaptability, but Pakistan cannot structurally be ignored in Afghan economic sustainability. In the case of Pakistan, transit limits are used selectively, which act as strategic leverage and thus, Kabul is likely to resolve cross-border militancy, narcotics, and smuggling networks, which are some of the fundamental problems of Pakistan's security concerns.

Conclusion

The situation of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations is at the nexus where the interdependence of the economies in both countries clashes with acute security needs. This study has revealed that the transit trade in Afghanistan is critical and mostly beneficial: Pakistan offers landlocked Afghanistan access to a sea, the shortest trade routes, and generous transit terms under APTTA, keeping in view the international principles of transit freedom (Abraze, 2022). The fact that the Pakistani route to Afghanistan was beneficial to the economy of Afghanistan, with cheaper rates, faster access to markets, and a place to sell its products, highlights the importance of why, regardless of the efforts of Kabul to reorient its economy, geography, and efficiency, it continue to pull the trade of the country back to the Pakistani gateways. Meanwhile, there are also valid issues in Pakistan due to the abuse of these transit spaces, including smuggling and the delivery of duty-free products into the internal market. The recent serious steps made by Pakistan to prevent such abuses were justified by law, and they were oriented at a more reasonable application of the transit regime, but they were painful to the Afghan traders only temporarily. They signify a nation that is protecting its economic security without forsaking its obligation to its neighbor.

Pakistan's side of the story then comes as a country that has done a lot for Afghanistan (in hosting millions of refugees), as well as giving Afghanistan essential transit routes and trade. And now fairly expects the Afghan government to pay back by attending to the security interests of Pakistan. The actions taken by Pakistan are in line with the interests of a state that emphasizes self-defense (a right that is provided in the UN Charter) and, at the same time, meets its international responsibilities towards a neighbor. Conversely, Afghanistan under the Taliban has enjoyed the fruits of Pakistani transit and hospitality; however, it has not shown responsibility in the aspects that directly affect the peace of Pakistan. To bring the region forward, this imbalance should be reversed. The policy of Pakistan - to tie economic collaboration with security assurances is a wise one. It makes a point well that the avenues of trade and wealth will be open and even wider, should and only should the avenues of war and bloodshed be forcefully closed.

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