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Trilateral Cooperation between Iran and Pakistan in Afghanistan: An Analysis of Geopolitical Challenges and Opportunities for Access to Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

Access to Central Asian markets, as a strategic economic and geopolitical priority for Iran, requires the opening of reliable transit routes through neighboring countries. In this context, Afghanistan—despite being the shortest and most natural corridor—has become part of a complex trilateral equation due to its internal instability and Pakistan's pivotal role in its developments. This study aims to assess the feasibility and conditions of Iran–Pakistan cooperation to operationalize Iran's transit route to Central Asia via Afghanistan. Employing a hybrid analytical framework that combines geopolitical realism (to explain competitive dynamics) and new institutionalism (to account for drivers of cooperation), the article argues that bilateral relations are situated within a field of opposing forces. On the one hand, historical rivalry, ideological divergence, project-based competition (Chabahar versus Gwadar), and interventions by regional actors (India and Saudi Arabia) and extra-regional powers (the United States and China) have created deep structural obstacles. On the other hand, the imperative to address shared security threats (cross-border terrorism) and the attractiveness of substantial economic gains from establishing transit corridors have generated unavoidable points of convergence. The article's key finding indicates that, despite these forced convergences, the formation of a strategic alliance or a stable, institutionalized cooperation under current conditions is unlikely. Instead, the most plausible scenario is the emergence of “episodic, fragile, and project-based cooperation,” which will be heavily influenced by domestic political fluctuations in both countries and by the stability (or instability) of Taliban governance in Afghanistan. The study further concludes that weaknesses in transit infrastructure—particularly in Afghanistan—constitute a costly structural constraint, and that historical and cultural commonalities can function only as a limited soft platform for confidence-building. Ultimately, the success of any cooperation is contingent upon the intelligent management of rivalries and the transformation of shared threats into pragmatic projects, with an emphasis on a three-tier diplomacy involving Pakistan (for security), the Taliban (for economic stability), and China (for mediation and investment).

Keywords: Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, transit, geopolitics, regional cooperation, competition, infrastructure

Introduction

Central Asia, with its vast energy reserves, expanding markets, and strategic position as the crossroads of Eurasia, has consistently attracted the attention of regional and global actors (1). For Iran, access to this region constitutes a strategic economic and geopolitical priority. However, the most significant structural obstacle in this regard is the lack of a direct land border with most Central Asian states (1). This geographical constraint has



compelled Iran to rely on transit routes through neighboring countries. Among the available options, Afghanistan—as a natural and historical passageway—despite being afflicted by profound security and political challenges, is still assessed as the most efficient and shortest land route connecting Iran to the heart of Central Asia (2). By contrast, alternative routes such as Turkmenistan, due to isolationist policies, infrastructural deficiencies, and the intensification of restrictions following the COVID-19 pandemic, lack the necessary reliability and scalability (3). Consequently, operationalizing the Afghan route has become an imperative.

Within this equation, Pakistan's role emerges as a key and decisive variable. Pakistan, owing to its unparalleled historical, political, and security influence over developments in Afghanistan, effectively holds the key to stability or instability in that country and, as a result, to the openness or closure of this transit corridor (2, 4). In other words, without taking Islamabad's role and interests into account, no sustainable plan for utilizing the Afghan route can be envisaged. Trilateral cooperation among Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan has the potential to lay the groundwork for comprehensive development that extends beyond the narrow domain of transit (5).

Accordingly, the main research question of this article is: *Under what conditions, and by overcoming which obstacles, can cooperation between Iran and Pakistan render Iran's transit route to Central Asia via Afghanistan operational and sustainable?*

The central hypothesis of the article is as follows: Despite historical rivalry, ideological differences, and the interventions of third-party actors, increasing convergence in two domains—economic interests (particularly in the development of transit and energy corridors) and shared security threats (such as cross-border terrorism and smuggling)—can serve as a driver for the formation of a pragmatic and limited cooperation between Iran and Pakistan with regard to Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the continuation and deepening of this cooperation are conditional upon the effective management of two external challenges: first, neutralizing or reducing India's strategic rivalry, as New Delhi perceives any Tehran–Islamabad alignment as a threat to its interests; and second, the intelligent utilization of China's mediating and investment role as an actor with substantial influence in Pakistan and whose economic interests in the region depend on relative stability. This article seeks to examine this hypothesis within an analytical framework combining pragmatic realism and institutionalism.

Theoretical Framework and Research Background

Historical and Cultural Background: Soft Infrastructure and Applied Capital for Cooperation

Relations among Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are rooted in a shared historical and civilizational context which, although fragmented by modern political transformations, continues to function as a form of social capital and a potential soft infrastructure for regional cooperation. The territories of these three countries were, at various points in history, part of major Iranian–Islamic empires—from the Achaemenids to the Timurids—leaving behind deep linguistic (Persian), religious (Islam in its various denominations), and cultural ties among their societies (6, 7). These commonalities, particularly in Persian literature and Sufi traditions, can facilitate trust-building and ease diplomatic discourse (8, 9).

Beyond these foundational affinities, the three countries share a rich reservoir of tangible and intangible cultural heritage that can be transformed into an operational domain for modern cooperation. Historical Silk Road routes traversing the region, monumental Islamic–Iranian architectural landmarks (from the mausoleum of Ferdowsi in Tus and Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad to Babur's Tomb in Kabul and the Shalimar Gardens of Lahore), as well as

continuous natural landscapes and shared local cultures among border communities, offer immense potential for the creation of “cultural tourism corridors” and joint heritage preservation initiatives (10, 11). The development of such projects can not only generate employment and sustainable economic growth in underdeveloped border regions, but also, by expanding direct people-to-people interactions among tourists, artists, and conservation experts, foster the social capital necessary to mitigate historical mistrust and enhance mutual understanding. This cultural-economic dimension constitutes the soft and human layer of the complex political-security cooperation equation and can serve as an effective prelude to confidence-building.

Nevertheless, the formation of modern nation-states within colonial-imposed borders fragmented this integrated civilizational space. Nineteenth-century British–Russian colonial rivalry—the “Great Game”—defined Afghanistan as a buffer state and drew its borders in a manner that restricted Iran’s historical access to Central Asia (12, 13). Subsequently, the creation of Pakistan in 1947 as an ideologically driven state added another layer of complexity to regional relations. From its inception, Pakistan was concerned with achieving strategic depth vis-à-vis India and viewed Afghanistan as a critical arena for this objective. This perception led to interventionist policies by Islamabad in Afghan affairs, ranging from support for the Mujahideen in the 1980s to its complex relationship with the Taliban (14, 15). Iran, for its part, has consistently been an active player in Afghanistan due to ethnic and sectarian ties with segments of Afghan society and concerns over the security of its eastern borders. Consequently, the trilateral relationship is characterized by a paradoxical mixture of deep cultural-civilizational affinities on the one hand, and geopolitical rivalries and suspicions arising from modern state-building on the other (16, 17). This duality constitutes the framework within which any future cooperation—whether in hard domains such as transit or soft domains such as tourism—must be understood, analyzed, and managed.

Analytical Framework: Integrating Geopolitical Realism and Neoinstitutionalism

To assess the feasibility and challenges of Iran–Pakistan cooperation in Afghanistan for access to Central Asia, this article employs a hybrid analytical framework that integrates two major schools of international relations: geopolitical realism and neoinstitutionalism.

From the perspective of geopolitical realism, states are the primary rational actors operating in an anarchic environment, prioritizing security and national interests while competing for power to ensure their survival (18). This approach effectively explains the deep roots of structural mistrust between Iran and Pakistan: traditional competition for influence in Afghanistan, border security concerns, ideological differences (Shi’a versus Sunni orientations with Wahhabi tendencies), and rivalry in transit projects (Chabahar versus Gwadar). It also accounts for the disruptive role of third-party actors such as India, which perceives any convergence between Tehran and Islamabad as contrary to its security interests and seeks to contain it through alignments such as the “India–Israel–Saudi Arabia” axis (19, 20). Realism thus emphasizes the hard constraints on cooperation, particularly in a highly volatile regional environment.

However, realism alone cannot fully explain the emergence of cooperation even amid rivalry. This is where neoinstitutionalism complements the analysis. Neoinstitutionalists argue that even in the absence of a supranational authority, states can cooperate on the basis of absolute shared interests—especially economic ones—and in order to reduce transaction costs by establishing cooperative regimes and institutions (21). This perspective provides an appropriate lens for examining the role of shared economic and security drivers in Iran–Pakistan relations. Both countries:

1. Suffer from instability in Afghanistan, which can become a haven for extremist groups, making the security of their shared borders vital.
2. Are actively seeking new transit corridors to stimulate economic growth and access regional markets (Central Asia for Iran, and more broadly Eurasia for both).
3. Face significant domestic and external economic pressures (sanctions against Iran and Pakistan's economic difficulties), rendering cooperation in infrastructure development and trade a pragmatic necessity (22).

These absolute shared interests can motivate the circumvention of historical rivalry and the formation of “piecemeal” or “functionalist” cooperation in specific domains—such as border security, targeted transit projects, or water management—within existing regional frameworks like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) or newly established trilateral mechanisms. This integrated framework enables a simultaneous analysis of realist constraints and institutionalist drivers of cooperation.

. Review and Critique of the Research Background and Statement of the Research Gap

The research background in this field can be grouped into several broad categories. Historical-relational analyses: A substantial number of works address the bilateral history of Iran–Pakistan relations or Pakistan's historical role in Afghanistan (e.g., (14, 15, 23)). These studies are essential for understanding the roots of current mistrust; however, they generally do not focus on analyzing the present situation and future outlook while accounting for new economic and geopolitical variables. Security-oriented studies: A major share of the literature, particularly after 2001, has focused on the security dimensions of the issue, ranging from Pakistan's role in supporting the Taliban to threats posed by transnational terrorist groups (e.g., (24-26)). Although these works effectively demonstrate the depth of the security challenge, they have less frequently addressed how these shared threats might themselves become a coercive driver for cooperation. Economic and transit analyses: Another strand of research examines the economic potential of regional cooperation and infrastructural projects such as Chabahar Port and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (e.g., (27, 28)). The strength of these works lies in their attention to key economic drivers, yet they often neglect— or treat simplistically— the political-security obstacles that complicate the implementation of such projects. Macro-geopolitical analyses: Some studies discuss the role of extra-regional actors such as the United States, China, and Russia in regional equations (e.g., (29, 30)). These analyses are important; however, they typically examine these actors in isolation and pay less attention to their interactive and reciprocal effects on Iran–Pakistan diplomacy and the two states' room for maneuver.

The research gap addressed by this article lies at the intersection of these four domains. While acknowledging the value of findings across all the above categories, this study argues that analyzing the possibility of Iran–Pakistan cooperation requires an integrated and dynamic approach that examines—simultaneously and interactively—four factors: (1) the heavy legacy of history and long-standing geopolitical rivalries (emphasized in historical studies); (2) the urgency of current shared security threats (highlighted in security-focused studies); (3) the strong pull of future economic and transit benefits (explored in economic analyses); and (4) the constraining or facilitating influence of regional and extra-regional actors, particularly India and China (treated in macro-geopolitical analyses). Most prior research has concentrated on one or two of these dimensions. The innovation of this article lies in proposing a hybrid analytical framework (realism–institutionalism) to assess the interaction of these four forces within a defined period, namely the post-Taliban era and especially the period following the U.S. withdrawal. The

central question is not whether Iran and Pakistan are rivals—since that is evident—but whether, under new regional geopolitical and economic conditions, the logic of pragmatic cooperation can prevail over the logic of entrenched rivalry, or at least relegate it to the margins, and what role third-party actors play in this equation. By focusing on the “transit route to Central Asia” as a concrete case study, the article seeks to test this key question.

Research Method

This study is conducted through qualitative analysis using a descriptive-analytical approach. The required data were collected through library-based research and the review of credible documents, including government reports, scholarly articles, and reputable domestic and international news sources. The data were then analyzed using a hybrid analytical framework combining realism and institutionalism in order to answer the main research question.

Pakistan’s Role in the Afghanistan Equation: From a Disruptive Actor to an Inevitable Partner

To understand the feasibility of Iran–Pakistan cooperation around Afghanistan, it is necessary to closely examine Islamabad’s historical and current role in that country. This role is dualistic and seemingly paradoxical: Pakistan is simultaneously one of the main drivers of Afghanistan’s continuing instability and, at the same time, the key to any durable solution and any stable transit corridor. An analysis of this duality makes it possible to understand Pakistan’s complex position and current motivations.

Pakistan as a Driver of Instability: The Historical Legacy

Pakistan’s foreign policy toward Afghanistan has consistently been dominated by a grand geopolitical concern: the pursuit of “strategic depth” vis-à-vis its long-standing rival, India. This perspective has defined Afghanistan not as an independent neighbor but as an arena for preventing encirclement by India and for gaining influence in Central Asia (31). The consequence of this outlook has been a series of disruptive measures that have eroded Afghanistan’s stability over the long term.

First, active support for armed groups has been the most visible manifestation of this policy, including comprehensive backing by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) for the Mujahideen in the war against Soviet occupation and, subsequently, military, financial, and logistical support for the Taliban from the 1990s onward (15, 32). While such support contributed in the short term to pushing out the Soviet Union and enabling the establishment of an aligned government in Kabul, in the long term it institutionalized a culture of violence, weakened state institutions, and intensified religious extremism—developments that ultimately endangered Pakistan’s own security (23). The emergence of groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) provides a clear illustration of the geopolitical “blowback” of this approach.

Second, Pakistan has instrumentalized the Durand Line dispute by avoiding a final settlement of the approximately 2,600-kilometer border with Afghanistan. No Afghan government—monarchical or republican—has recognized this boundary, widely viewed as a legacy of British colonialism (33). By maintaining this dispute as a pressure lever, Islamabad has sought to prevent the emergence of a strong and cohesive government in Kabul that might advance territorial claims. This policy has exacerbated chronic instability in Pashtun-populated areas on both sides of the border and provided insurgent groups with safe havens.

Third, Pakistan’s traditional governance perspective has treated Afghanistan instrumentally, preferring an Afghanistan that is “weak and dependent” or “unstable yet manageable” rather than one that is strong, independent,

and neutral (34). This outlook has cast doubt on full cooperation with any comprehensive national plan aimed at long-term stability.

Pakistan as the Key to Stability: Present Necessity and a Forward-Looking Logic

Despite this legacy, developments over the past two decades have gradually altered Pakistan's calculations, placing it in a position where it is compelled to reassess its role toward becoming an "inevitable partner" in stability. This shift is driven by a combination of pressures and incentives.

First, returning security threats and domestic costs have transformed Afghan instability from a geopolitical opportunity into a direct security threat for Pakistan. A new wave of terrorist attacks originating from Afghan territory by groups such as the TTP has imposed heavy human and economic costs on Pakistan (2). Consequently, achieving at least minimal stability across the border has become an urgent security requirement.

Second, economic incentives and the role of transit corridors constitute the most significant pull factor behind Pakistan's potential policy adjustment. The ambitious China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), much of which passes through insecure areas of Balochistan, depends critically on regional stability for success (29). Pakistan seeks to connect CPEC to Central Asian markets, and Afghanistan plays a pivotal role as a transit bridge in this pathway. Without security in Afghanistan, the prospect of Pakistan becoming a regional "connectivity hub" cannot be realized. These economic interests converge with Iran's interest in creating an alternative transit route, thereby generating an important point of convergence (35).

Third, Pakistan's unmatched influence over the Taliban and the responsibilities that accompany it represent both an asset and a liability, particularly after the Taliban's return to power in 2021 (36). On the one hand, Pakistan can leverage this influence to contain border threats and support a minimal level of governance. On the other hand, the international community and neighboring states (including Iran) increasingly hold Pakistan directly accountable for Taliban behavior, pressuring Islamabad toward a more constructive and mediatory posture.

Fourth, the risk of regional isolation has increased. Continuation of past disruptive policies exposes Pakistan to growing isolation in the region. Tense relations with Afghanistan, rivalry with Iran, and structural hostility toward India have rendered Pakistan's geopolitical position fragile. Under these conditions, identifying areas of cooperation—even limited—with Iran regarding Afghanistan can provide a pathway to mitigating isolation and improving Pakistan's regional standing.

Overall, the foregoing analysis suggests that Pakistan is undergoing a paradigmatic transition. While older cognitive structures grounded in rivalry and strategic depth remain influential, newer pressures arising from domestic security threats, the pull of major economic benefits (CPEC), and the risk of isolation have pushed Pakistan's calculus toward a form of security–economic pragmatism. Within this emerging framework, Pakistan is increasingly compelled to accept Afghanistan, to some extent, as a necessary partner in its economic project and as an unavoidable counterpart in managing cross-border threats. This gradual shift opens a window of opportunity—small and fragile though it may be—for cooperation with Iran. Iran–Pakistan cooperation is thus no longer grounded in trust or historical friendship, but in a shared diagnosis of necessity: the necessity of establishing a minimum level of stability in Afghanistan to enable economic objectives and contain security threats. The success of this pragmatic cooperation, however, remains contingent upon managing two other major obstacles: India's rivalry and the role of extra-regional powers.

Analysis of the Challenges Facing Iran–Pakistan Cooperation

Cooperation between Iran and Pakistan to establish a sustainable transit route to Central Asia, despite potential shared interests, confronts a complex and multi-layered set of challenges. These obstacles—extending from the bilateral level to the extra-regional level—substantially reduce the likelihood of any strategic alliance and, at best, confine cooperation to a limited, fragile, and project-based interaction. An analysis of these challenges across three distinct yet interrelated layers is therefore necessary.

The Bilateral Layer: Deep Roots of Mistrust and Competition

At the core of the problem lies historical and structural mistrust between Tehran and Islamabad, which is itself the product of several factors. First, there is the **history of competition in Afghanistan**. As noted earlier, both states have traditionally treated Afghanistan as an arena for influence competition. Iran is concerned about Pakistan's influence over certain groups such as the Taliban, which hold anti-Shi'a orientations. Pakistan, by contrast, has long feared the expansion of Iran's cultural and political influence in western Afghanistan and perceives it as a threat to the balance of power in Kabul (34). This long-standing rivalry has eroded the foundations of trust.

Second, an **ideological and sectarian divide** further complicates relations. While Islam constitutes a shared framework, differences in official religious orientation (Shi'a Islam in Iran) and the dominant state orientation in Pakistan (Hanafi Sunni Islam with susceptibility to Wahhabi influence), particularly under the broader context of Iran–Saudi competition, have become a line of cleavage. Iran often views Pakistan as a traditional Sunni ally of Saudi Arabia and as a supporter of extremist networks, while segments of Pakistan's elite and security establishment accuse Iran of expanding Shi'a influence in the region (37). This divergence makes the construction of a shared strategic discourse difficult.

Third, there is direct **economic-geopolitical competition**, exemplified by the ports of Chabahar and Gwadar. These ports represent the most tangible symbols of the two states' rivalry to become the region's primary transit hub. Iran's Chabahar—developed with India's participation—and Pakistan's Gwadar—supported by major Chinese investment—compete to attract commercial traffic from Afghanistan and Central Asia (38, 39). While such competition could, in theory, be reframed as “competitive cooperation,” in practice it has more often become an obstacle to policy coordination because of broader political considerations, including the roles of India and China. Each side interprets the success of the rival project as a reduction of its own strategic relevance.

The Regional Layer: India's Role and the Tehran–Riyadh Rivalry

Bilateral challenges are intensified within a hostile regional environment. At this layer, two actors serve as negative catalysts.

First, India plays an active deterrent role. New Delhi views any stable convergence between Tehran and Islamabad as a strategic threat. Such cooperation not only strengthens Pakistan but could also facilitate Iran's access to Central Asia and, by extension, expand Iranian influence along India's northern strategic periphery (20). In response, India has sought to preserve leverage through investment in Chabahar while competing with Gwadar, and simultaneously to contain Iran's regional influence by strengthening strategic alignments, including an “India–

Israel–Saudi Arabia” axis (19). India’s pressures—both to constrain Iran’s engagement with Pakistan and to isolate Pakistan regionally—have narrowed the room for independent cooperation between the two states.

Second, Iran–Saudi rivalry on Pakistani soil constitutes an additional regional constraint. Pakistan has become an arena for intense Saudi–Iran competition for religious, political, and economic influence. Riyadh, through large-scale financial support, Pakistani labor absorption, and investment in Pakistan’s energy sector, has developed deep leverage within Pakistan’s economy and, indirectly, its politics (37). Saudi Arabia can deploy this leverage to limit Iran’s influence and is likely to respond to any major Islamabad move toward strategic cooperation with Tehran through economic pressure. This dynamic has encouraged ambivalence and pronounced caution in Pakistan’s foreign policy toward Iran.

The Extra-Regional Layer: The New “Great Game” and Structural Constraints

Great-power competition forms the overarching and determining framework within which Iran and Pakistan operate.

First, the United States and a dual-containment logic shape key constraints. Washington has simultaneously pursued policies to constrain Iran (through maximum-pressure sanctions and diplomatic pressure) and to counter China (including by strengthening partnerships with India). Pakistan thus faces a difficult balancing position: it remains a traditional partner of China but does not seek a complete rupture with the United States. Any close Pakistan–Iran cooperation could be interpreted in Washington as alignment with a sanctioned state and as facilitating China’s regional penetration, potentially generating additional pressure on Islamabad and reducing its willingness to assume risk (30).

Second, China presents a more ambiguous role: a potential mediator or a self-interested stakeholder. Beijing is the only actor with substantial leverage over both states—especially Pakistan—and it perceives major economic interests in regional stability for the success of its Belt and Road–linked agenda. In theory, China could play a positive mediating role by reducing Iran–Pakistan tensions and facilitating trilateral cooperation around Afghanistan (29). In practice, however, China’s overriding priority is the security of its investments in Pakistan, particularly in relation to CPEC. If forced to choose between Islamabad’s interests and Tehran’s, China’s preference is structurally predictable. Therefore, while China’s role may be facilitative in principle, it is likely to be conditional and asymmetric, and cannot by itself bridge the deep bilateral divide.

Interlocking Challenges and the Logic of Limited Cooperation

These challenges are not independent; they are deeply interwoven. The Chabahar–Gwadar competition (bilateral layer) is directly shaped by India–China rivalry (extra-regional layer). Historical mistrust (bilateral layer) is reinforced and intensified by Iran–Saudi competition (regional layer). This interlocking structure renders broad, institutionalized cooperation unlikely.

Yet the existence of these heavy constraints does not make interaction impossible. Rather, it suggests that the operative logic is that of limited, pragmatic cooperation within narrowly defined interests. Cooperation can emerge only in domains where absolute shared interests are sufficiently strong to overcome historical rivalry and external pressures—such as joint management of borders with Afghanistan to address urgent security threats, or technical coordination on a specific transit project that yields tangible gains for both sides.

The State of Transit Infrastructure in the Three Countries: Physical Bottlenecks of Cooperation

Beyond geopolitical and security challenges, the practical success of any joint transit arrangement among Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan depends on the existence of efficient and integrated physical infrastructure (40). Without reliable, secure, and modern road and rail networks, even the most attractive political agreements will fail at the implementation stage. This section analyzes the current status of these critical infrastructures in each of the three countries and identifies the principal bottlenecks.

Iran: Significant Assets with a Need for Targeted Upgrading

Iran possesses the most advanced transit network among the three states. In the rail sector, strategic lines in eastern Iran—including the Mashhad–Sarakhs route (linking to Turkmenistan and Central Asia), the Bam–Zahedan line, and the developing Zahedan–Chabahar branch—constitute key assets for east–west and north–south transit flows (41). In the road sector, the Mashhad–Taybad–Herat and Zahedan–Mirjaveh corridors function, respectively, as major gateways to central and southern Afghanistan. Iran’s principal strength lies in connecting these border arteries to an integrated national rail and road network. Nevertheless, there are weaknesses that reduce efficiency, including the urgent need to electrify and double-track eastern rail lines to increase capacity and speed, as well as the modernization and capacity expansion of certain worn road axes, particularly in central and eastern regions (27).

Afghanistan: The Analytical Core and the Largest Bottleneck

The condition of Afghanistan’s transit infrastructure is the decisive factor for the feasibility of any regional corridor. The country’s connectivity network revolves around the approximately 2,200-kilometer “Ring Road,” linking key cities such as Herat, Kandahar, Kabul, and Mazar-e Sharif. Because the cited source in the original text is not included in your reference list, no citation is inserted here. This road and its vital branches (such as Kandahar–Spin Boldak toward Pakistan) constitute the backbone of land transit. In the rail sector, the most significant operational line is the Khaf–Herat–Mazar-e Sharif railway, which connects Afghanistan westward to Iran and northward toward Uzbekistan (42). However, these infrastructures suffer from three major problems: severe damage from four decades of conflict, chronic shortages of maintenance and repair funding, and low technical standards (including insufficient width, poor pavement quality, and inadequate safety signaling). As a result, travel times are lengthy, vehicle maintenance costs are high, and reliability is extremely low (2).

Pakistan: CPEC-Centered Development and Connectivity to Gwadar

Pakistan’s recent infrastructure strategy has centered on the development of CPEC and Gwadar Port. For linking Afghanistan to this network, the Quetta–Chaman road and rail axes toward the Spin Boldak border are of particular importance (38). The older Khyber Pass route toward Jalalabad and Kabul, although historically significant, has limited reliability due to chronic insecurity. New investments under CPEC have largely focused on improving Gwadar’s connectivity to Pakistan’s internal centers and to the China border, while connections to Afghanistan remain a secondary priority unless framed as an extension for access to Central Asia (29).

Principal Bottlenecks (Shared Weaknesses)

A comparative assessment of the three countries reveals several structural bottlenecks. First, there is the absence of an integrated, interoperable rail linkage, as rail standards and technical specifications are not fully aligned across the three systems, leading to the need for transshipment at borders, which increases both time and cost. Because the original citation here (UNCTAD, 2022) is not included in your provided list, no citation is inserted. Second, uneven and often poor road quality within Afghanistan has turned the Ring Road and its branches into a qualitative choke point that substantially reduces average transit speed. Third, there is a shortage of modern logistics, warehousing, and customs equipment at border terminals and along corridors; however, since the original citation (Asian Development Bank, 2021) is not in your list, no citation is added here. Fourth, these infrastructures show high vulnerability to shocks, as they are persistently exposed to security threats (such as attacks on convoys and roadside mines) and natural hazards (including floods and landslides), which undermines reliability (43).

The state of transit infrastructure—particularly in Afghanistan—thus yields a clear conclusion: infrastructural weakness is not a secondary obstacle but a costly structural constraint. It renders immediate transit cooperation expensive, inefficient, and unreliable. Over the long term, sustainable operationalization of corridors will depend on major, coordinated investments in modernization, standardization, and securitization of infrastructure. This analysis transforms the notion of infrastructure cooperation from a political slogan into an operational necessity and a non-negotiable precondition for any shared transit vision. Without addressing this physical bottleneck, discussions of cooperation at the political and security levels will remain incomplete and unrealistic.

Areas of Convergence and Possible Scenarios

Despite the profound challenges outlined above, it is impossible to deny the existence of meaningful areas of convergence between Iran's and Pakistan's national interests. These shared points—largely rooted in urgent security and economic imperatives—create defensive lines on the basis of which limited and pragmatic cooperation can emerge. Analyzing these areas and mapping plausible future scenarios provides a more realistic picture of the outlook ahead.

Undeniable Areas of Convergence

There are four key domains in which the interests of the two countries are clearly aligned.

First, there is the imperative of border security and combating transnational terrorism. Instability in Afghanistan directly threatens the security of eastern Iran (particularly Sistan and Baluchestan and Khorasan provinces) and western Pakistan (Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). The activities of groups such as ISIS-K, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and networks involved in drug and human trafficking constitute a shared and existential threat to both countries (2, 44). Cooperation in intelligence sharing, border-guard coordination, and joint measures to contain these threats is an urgent necessity that can progress—at the technical and security levels—even amid political mistrust.

Second, there is the economic horizon of a transit corridor. Both states, independently, seek to become a regional connectivity hub: Iran through the Chabahar project and Pakistan through CPEC and Gwadar Port. At first glance, this appears as rivalry; however, a shared absolute interest exists at the center of this competition—stability and security in Afghanistan as the connecting bridge. The success of both projects depends on the possibility of safe

and predictable transit of goods through Afghan territory (45). Because the original citation (Asian Development Bank, 2021) is not included in your provided reference list, no citation is inserted here. This mutual dependence on an external factor (Afghanistan) can create incentives for minimal coordination and dialogue on corridor standardization, customs facilitation, and route security.

Third, there is shared management of Afghanistan-related issues. Both countries have an interest in preventing the complete collapse of Afghanistan, containing migration pressures, and avoiding the transformation of Afghanistan into an absolute power vacuum. This overlap can facilitate consultations and diplomatic coordination between the two states in regional and international arenas concerning Afghanistan.

Fourth, shared cultural and tourism capital as a platform for confidence-building offers a less politically sensitive domain for cooperation. Deep historical, linguistic, and heritage affinities can support joint projects in areas with lower political sensitivity. Cooperation in heritage restoration, museum networking, and cross-border tourism packages can open new channels for public diplomacy, elite dialogue, and sustainable income generation for border communities. Success in these domains can create the positive atmosphere and trust needed to address more difficult security and economic issues.

Analysis of Plausible Scenarios

Considering the interaction of constraints and opportunities, three plausible scenarios can be drawn for the future trajectory of cooperation.

In the optimistic scenario (limited pragmatic cooperation), the pressure of shared security threats and the pull of economic interests overcome historical rivalry and external pressures. With positive Chinese mediation and a focus on absolute interests, the two countries manage to establish sectoral and relatively institutionalized cooperation in specific domains. Examples could include forming a “joint border security commission” or agreeing on a “preferential transit corridor” with harmonized customs rules. Under this scenario, the Afghan route gradually becomes more operational with fewer fluctuations. Probability: low. Impact: very high.

In the most likely scenario (episodic, project-based cooperation with fluctuations), cooperation neither becomes institutionalized nor collapses entirely. Instead, it proceeds intermittently, reactively, and in a project-driven manner. Cooperation may intensify after a major shared terrorist incident and then recede as the shock dissipates or as domestic political balances shift in either country. Economic projects, likewise, will be subject to periodic progress and pauses as political relations fluctuate. The Afghan route remains unstable and unreliable for large-scale investment. Probability: high. Impact: medium.

In the pessimistic scenario (escalating rivalry and corridor lock-in), regional rivalries (especially further activation of an India–Israel–Saudi alignment) and extra-regional tensions (such as heightened Iran–U.S. or Pakistan–U.S. frictions) intensify to a degree that eliminates space for cooperation. The two countries blame each other for Afghan problems and revert to past disruptive policies. In this outcome, the transit route not only fails to develop but becomes fully “locked” due to escalating insecurity. Probability: medium. Impact: highly negative.

Condensed Case Study: Chabahar Port as the Real Test of Cooperation

Chabahar is not merely an economic project; it functions as a live testing ground for assessing the possibility of Iran–Pakistan cooperation. Its challenges reflect the broader obstacles affecting the corridor.

First, competition with Gwadar means that any progress in Chabahar is interpreted in Islamabad as reducing Gwadar's strategic importance. Second, the role of India places Chabahar at the center of India–Pakistan rivalry and heightens Pakistan's sensitivity (39). Third, security challenges in Sistan and Baluchestan increase operational and insurance costs (41). Fourth, U.S. sanctions on Iran complicate the attraction of foreign investment and technology for port development; because the original text provides no in-text citation here and your instruction is to leave uncited content uncited, no citation is added.

The key lesson from Chabahar is that unless overarching political and security issues between Iran and Pakistan—and the actors influencing them—are resolved or at least effectively managed, even the most economically attractive projects will face severe delays, uncertainty, and the risk of failure. The success of Chabahar, and by extension the entire transit route, depends less on economic justification than on the creation of a minimum level of political trust and strategic coordination—conditions that are presently largely absent. Therefore, prior to prioritizing projects, the focus should be on establishing dialogue and crisis-management mechanisms aimed at preventing the pessimistic scenario.

Conclusion

This study set out to address the central question: *Under what conditions, and by overcoming which obstacles, can cooperation between Iran and Pakistan render Iran's transit route to Central Asia via Afghanistan operational and sustainable?* The comprehensive analysis conducted in the preceding sections demonstrates that the answer to this question cannot be reduced to a simple “yes” or “no,” but rather lies in understanding the complex dynamics of conflict and convergence that shape bilateral relations.

The article's initial hypothesis—that convergence in economic interests and shared security threats could act as a driver of pragmatic cooperation—is confirmed. However, the analysis also shows that the intensity and depth of obstacles, particularly at the regional and extra-regional levels, are significantly stronger than initially anticipated. Accordingly, the hypothesis must be qualified: such convergence can only give rise to episodic, fragile, and largely technical–security cooperation in response to shared crises (such as terrorist attacks) or around very specific projects, rather than producing a strategic alliance or durable, institutionalized cooperation. Moreover, while China's role is important, it does not necessarily function as an impartial mediator; rather, it enters the equation as an interested actor with a clear priority—protecting its investments and Pakistan's centrality within CPEC.

The key finding of this research is that the primary driving force behind any potential opening of the transit route is located neither in Tehran nor in Islamabad, but in Kabul and Kandahar. As long as the Taliban, as the de facto rulers of Afghanistan, are unable to ensure a minimum level of internal stability, exercise control over rival extremist groups (such as ISIS–K), and secure transport corridors, no degree of Iran–Pakistan cooperation will be sufficient to operationalize the route. Consequently, the issue shifts from “bilateral cooperation between Iran and Pakistan” to “trilateral competition and cooperation within the framework of an unstable Afghanistan.” In this triangular equation, Pakistan—due to its unparalleled influence over the Taliban—enjoys a decisive strategic advantage, while Iran is placed in a reactive or follower position. The success of the corridor depends on transforming the Taliban from a “security problem” into an “economic partner,” a transition that itself hinges on internal transformation within the movement and coordinated pressure from neighboring states.

Strategic Recommendations for Iranian Policymakers

In light of these findings, Iran's foreign policy approach to opening this route requires a three-tiered, pragmatic, and non-ideological strategy grounded in narrowly defined economic interests.

1. Diplomacy with Pakistan: Confidence-Building through a Focus on Absolute Security

Immediate security mechanisms should be established. Instead of broad political dialogue, Iran should propose the creation of a joint operational border task force with military and security representatives from both countries, tasked with concrete and depoliticized action against specific terrorist groups such as ISIS-K and TTP. Success in a single joint operation could generate trust capital for subsequent steps.

The transit issue should be clearly separated from port competition. Iran should explicitly frame the development of Chabahar as complementary to CPEC and as part of a wider network of corridors rather than as a substitute. Proposing a trilateral technical working group (Iran–Pakistan–Afghanistan) to standardize transit tariffs, transport documentation, and insurance regimes would represent a practical confidence-building measure.

Engagement with non-governmental actors should be strengthened. Expanding commercial dialogue with Pakistan's chambers of commerce and with Baloch investors on both sides of the border could create an effective lobbying constituency to reduce tensions and apply pressure on governments to sustain cooperation.

2. Diplomacy with the Taliban: Economy as a Lever for Influence and Stabilization

Iran should offer an attractive and tangible economic package. Instead of relying primarily on cultural affinities, Tehran should present a clearly structured proposal that includes guaranteed purchases of Afghan agricultural products, investment in specific transit infrastructure (such as rehabilitation of the Herat–Kandahar road), and technical training for customs officials and corridor security personnel.

Security should be reframed as a joint economic project. Rather than treating border insecurity as a unilateral complaint, Iran could propose the creation of a "joint transit corridor protection force," employing and training local personnel under trilateral supervision.

Ideological differences should be temporarily set aside. To advance purely economic objectives, Iranian diplomacy should temporarily downplay sectarian and political divergences and emphasize the shared language of material benefit.

3. Diplomacy with China: Strategic Use of Beijing's Influence

Iran should present a clear "win-win-win" proposal to China, demonstrating that stability in Afghanistan—managed through a trilateral framework with a strong Pakistani role—is essential to the success of CPEC. Iran could suggest that Chinese investment in segments of the Afghan transit route connected to CPEC would simultaneously secure Chinese interests, contribute to Afghan stability, and facilitate Iran–Pakistan cooperation.

Active mediation should be explicitly requested. China should be encouraged to participate not merely as an observer, but as a facilitator and guarantor in trilateral Iran–Pakistan–Afghanistan dialogue on transit routes. Beijing's decisive influence over Islamabad is a critical key to unlocking many deadlocks.

Coordination within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization should be pursued. As a new member, Iran should place border security and Afghan transit on the organization's agenda and request Chinese support in transforming these issues into a multilateral project under the organization's auspices.

4. Leveraging Cultural and Tourism Diplomacy as a Catalyst

Iran can take the initiative by hosting trilateral cultural heritage forums, supporting joint academic projects on regional history, and facilitating religious and cultural tourism. These soft measures can help construct a shared narrative around mutual interests, reinforce the image of Iran as a cultural and civilizational neighbor, and lower the political costs of economic and security cooperation for governments.

Iran's access to Central Asia through Afghanistan is a long-term and highly challenging project. Its success depends less on idealized visions of regional cooperation than on the intelligent management of rivalries and the transformation of shared threats into shared projects. Iran must abandon inflated expectations, focus on the smallest feasible areas of cooperation, and treat each limited success as a stepping stone for further confidence-building. Along this complex path, China's diplomacy and the Taliban's economic pragmatism are likely to be more decisive than the direct political will of Tehran and Islamabad themselves.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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